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by **BRETT HALLIDAY**

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by **EDWARD Y. BREESE**



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MIKE SHAYNE



MARCH, 1970
VOL. 26, NO. 4

MYSTERY MAGAZINE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL THE LOBSTER WAR.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

*Out in the fog they were waiting, the sea beasts
who had destroyed her man. And there was only
one she dared turn to; Mike Shayne—who knew
that death was waiting for him out there—but
had pledged to avenge his friend's tortured end.*

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THE LOBSTER WAR

Somewhere, hidden in the fog, they waited, men who had killed before and would kill again, as Mike Shayne answered a widow's plea to track down the sea beasts who had destroyed her man.



by Brett Halliday

DEAD MEN DON'T steer boats, and this one was no exception. He lay face down in the open cockpit of the twenty-foot, broad beamed, inboard-motor work boat and let the throttled down motor take him where it would. It took him in great sweeping circles over the glass smooth early morning surface of south Biscayne Bay.

In one direction the horizon was

walled with a ragged fringe of ivory white spires that marked the skyline of the magic cities of Miami and Miami Beach. In the other the mud flats were bearded with a solid stubble of interlaced mangrove branch and root.

The white cruising yacht *Alice* of Philadelphia had made an early start down the intra-coastal waterway. Alfred Rosenberg, the owner,

Complete in this issue

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL



and his wife and daughter, Ada and Alice, were finishing breakfast in the lounge when the skipper called in from the wheelhouse up forward.

"There's a fishing boat acting mighty funny up here. Do you think we could investigate? Looks like something's wrong."

"I don't think so," Alfred said. "We're in a hurry, and—"

"Oh please, daddy." Fourteen year old Alice was still young enough to squeal at times. "Let's go look. We haven't had any excitement on this whole trip. Please."

The yacht went to investigate and managed to intercept the circling craft in deep water. A deck hand went overside to make a line fast and Alice scrambled down behind him to investigate on her own account. Almost immediately she regretted the impulse.

She stood in an inch of sloshing bilgewater and blood that was staining her brand new, robin's-egg-blue deck shoes a rusty and malevolent red.

The dead man lay face down with his nose and mouth in the bloody water. He had on khaki pants, a faded blue denim shirt and a broad belt supporting a holstered revolver. His head and feet were bare. He was young, broad shouldered and slim-hipped, and just the type Alice would have delighted in if he'd only been alive. Sticking straight up from the center of his back was the weathered oak shaft of a fishing

spear. The four barbed tines were embedded their full four inches into the body.

By a minor miracle no one of the points had broken the spine. Before he died the man had used the forefinger of his right hand to write something in his own blood on the planking under the wheel.

"Murder," it said. "Tell Mike Sh . . ." and trailed off aimlessly.

The cryptic message meant nothing to the Rosenbergs or their Philadelphia crew. It did to the sergeant and patrolman of harbor police aboard the trim launch which boiled down from Miami in answer to the ship-to-shore telephone appeal.

"Shayne," the sergeant said. "It can't be nobody but Mike Shayne."

"How does he fit into this?" the patrolman asked.

"If I could answer that sort of question," his superior said, "you'd address me as captain instead of sergeant. Now look alive there and make fast a line."

The phones found Michael Shayne fast enough. At least they found his secretary, Lucy Hamilton, fast enough and she knew where to reach him at that hour.

He was waiting at the police docking wharf on the new Dodge Island Seaport. With him were Captain Bill Ryan of Miami Homicide, a man from the coroner's office, an ambulance sent by Jackson Memorial Hospital and feature writer Tim Rourke of the Miami News with attendant photographer.

"Looks like a parade," Shayne said as the boats came in sight, heading in to dock.

It did at that. The police launch came first with the grey, ungainly fishing boat in tow. After them, and throttled down to keep from overrunning the slower craft, came the Rosenberg's gleaming white sixty-five foot, diesel-powered beauty. After this one, like small dogs harrying a majestic bull, were a gaggle of speed boats and runabouts, mostly overloaded with curious teenagers who'd smelled excitement from afar and come to look things over.

"All we need now," Shayne said, "is a grand marshal."

The body was photographed from all angles by a police photog while Rourke's man made a record of the scene. Then it was brought onto the dock to be officially declared dead and to have the four-pronged spear taken out of the back by the coroner's deputy.

"You know him?" Ryan asked Shayne.

"I know him all right. You can tell Will Gentry that his name's Peter Wright and he probably owns the boat they found him in. Boy's been a commercial fisherman all his life—mostly mackerel and lobster in the Bay. Should be papers in his wallet to prove it."

"Sergeant Bender tells me the wallet wasn't on him. So far they've found no papers anywhere on the boat. Whoever killed him probably started the motor with the idea the



Lucy Hamilton

boat'd bury itself in mangroves and not be found till the body was too far gone to identify. He didn't count on the rudder turning just enough to keep the boat turning. By the way, Mike, who's Molly besides the name on the boat?"

"Molly's his wife. When you and Will get through with her, tell her to come on by my office."

"I will. But why? Is this Pete Wright a client of yours?"

"He got to be," Shayne said, "when he wrote down my name in blood. Besides I've known the kids ever since I used to hire his daddy's boat to go after dolphin and sailfish in the Gulf Stream."

The ambulance took the body away and the authorities departed at the same time. A taxi carried the Rosenbergs to headquarters to make an official statement. Only Rourke and Mike Shayne were left standing on the dock.

"Who did it, Mike?" Rourke

asked with the easy familiarity of an old and trusted friend.

"I haven't an idea," Mike Shayne said. "You know it's never that easy, Tim. I haven't even seen the boy in five-six years. Maybe I'll know more when I've seen Molly. Far as I can tell right now, he had no personal enemies at all."

"I'll go file a story," Rourke said. "Then I'll stop by your office and bring a fifth of good bourbon for a passport."

"While you're at it," Shayne said, "bring along everything the *News* morgue has on the lobster war for the last couple of years."

It was only a short drive from the Port to Shayne's offices on East Flagler St. They were on the second floor of an older corner building, and consisted of three high-ceilinged, comfortably furnished rooms. There was a large office and reception room in front with a smaller private room which Shayne used only occasionally for private conferences. Back of these, he recently added a smaller office which became vacant when the elderly real estate broker who'd rented it for years had retired. Shayne had put in an apartment-sized electric stove and refrigerator so he and Lucy could fix snacks there when working late. There was also a small attached lavatory room complete with stall shower.

The whole suite was less than five minutes walk from the apartment

hotel where Shayne had lived for years.

Lucy Hamilton was waiting for him.

"You had two calls, Michael," she said. "I don't like either of them, and the callers wouldn't leave their names."

"What gems of wisdom did they leave?"

"The first was a man," Lucy consulted her notebook. "He said to tell Shayne if he wanted to stick his nose in bilge water to find out where Sam Duggan spent last night. He said he was a friend."

"I don't know any Sam Duggan," Shayne said. "What else?"

"The other," she said reflectively, "is a sexy voiced female who doesn't have a name either. She said Petey just got what he asked for, and you better keep your nose clean. Apparently the whole town's worrying about your nose today."

The big redhead rubbed the organ under discussion. "I'll bet on my nose to outlast theirs," he said. Then: "It strikes me the news has gotten around fast."

"Everywhere but here," Lucy said. "Who's Petey anyway, and what is all this about?"

"Can you rustle up coffee and Danish?" Shayne asked in turn. "I'll try to fill you in while we wait for the widow."

Lucy knew better than to ask: "What widow?" She headed for the kitchen.

II

THIRTY MINUTES later Mike Shayne washed down a last bite of buttered pastry with his third cup of hot, black coffee and reached for a black Havana cigar. Lucy Hamilton took the plate and cup away and tossed him a box of wooden matches.

"Why don't you keep out of this like your girl friend on the phone decided you should?" she asked. "It's not really your case. Will Gentry's boys will take care of things if you give them a chance."

"Petey Wright trusted me or he'd never have used my name," Shayne said. "That deals me in. Besides I want to know who Sam Duggan is."

"And," Lucy said, "nobody's tried to kill you in at least a couple of weeks now. Life's been dull around here; but not so dull I'd like to change it. Can't you ever leave well enough alone?"

She already knew the answer.

Shayne called his old friend Chief Gentry at his office in the shining new police headquarters.

"Will," he said, "you know I'm interested in the fish-spear killing. Have you got a case against anyone yet?"

"No I haven't," Gentry said. "I won't be able to help at all, Mike. Fred Burdick, the Metropolitan Dade County sheriff, has already sent a wagon to transfer the body from our morgue to his. Claims the man was killed near where he was found in

South Bay and that's out of my jurisdiction. Since it was found in his water and nobody can prove different, I've got no way to make a beef stick."

"Good old Fred," Shayne said. "I gather he's being as enthusiastic-ally cooperative as usual."

Both men laughed a trifle bitterly.

"Just exactly like he always is," Gentry said. "I might not even get the time of day from his department if I offered to pay cash for it. He wants this case all to himself."

"Professional jealousy," Shayne said. "His boys haven't solved a genuine murder in years."

"I don't think so, Mike. This one is likely to be a real headache. He's just too damn eager to take it off my hands even at the risk of getting his own burned. I think maybe somebody real high up has lit a fire under him. You know Fred. He's always responsive to a little political heat."

"I know," Shayne said. "To change the subject, Will, can you have somebody make me a copy of your file on the lobster war?"

"Officially no," Gentry said. "You'll have it in an hour. You think there's a tie-in, Mike?"

"Who knows? Anyway it's the only idea I've got so far. Also can you check I.D. and let me have anything you've got on the name Sam Duggan? No, I've got nothing but the name so far."

"Why, Mike," Gentry said, "you

know it's your duty to pass that name on to the county public safety department." He laughed again.

"Yeah, I know it, Will. I just keep forgetting."

He had barely hung up the phone when Tim Rourke came in without knocking. He sat down and passed Shayne a fat brown envelope taken from his briefcase. The redhead put a mass of news clippings on his desk blotter and began looking through them. Rourke got three tumblers out of the office kitchen and poured stiff drinks for himself and Shayne and a lighter shot for Lucy Hamilton.

Shayne flipped through the clippings looking at only the headlines and lead-paragraphs of most of them. Once in a while he grunted, read one all the way through, and tossed it to Lucy. Knowing his mind as well as he did, she made fast Xerox copies of these on an office machine in the back room.

Before he'd finished, the phone rang. Lucy listened for a minute and then passed him the instrument.

"This is Molly Wright," a soft, feminine voice said. "Captain Ryan of the police said you want to see me. I don't dare come to your office."

"Why not?" Shayne said. "Where are you now?"

"I'm at a pay phone in the police station corridor. I'm scared. When I went out to the parking lot just now the right rear tire of our car was slashed. There was a note stuck

in the slashed part of the tire. It said: *Get this fixed. Then go home and keep your mouth shut. Next time it could be all four tires—or your neck.* Mike, I'm scared. What will I do?"

Shayne grunted. "Stay right in the station corridor. Nobody'll dare touch you there. My secretary will come over in a cab and get you."

"All right, Mike. But tell her to hurry."

Shayne hung up the phone and brought Lucy up to date.

"I can take my car," she said.

"Nothing doing," Shayne insisted. "I don't want you hit on the way back. Take a cab and let him go when you get there. Ask Will Gentry to send you both back in a prowler. That way I'll be sure you get here."

Lucy left in a cab as he'd asked.

"What's all that about?" Rourke asked.

Shayne told him as he went through more of the clippings. Finally he shoved the rest of the stack away from him and leaned back. "Nothing there but background," he said. "No names that come up as prime suspects, though there's a plenty of maybes and might-bes."

"You sure it's part of the lobster war, Mike?"

"I'm never sure," the redhead detective said, "but I don't see how it can be anything else. Petey Wright has a string of lobster pots like his daddy before him. That puts him in the lobster war. There's nothing else



on his record to make him enemies. He's never been arrested or mixed up with hoodlums. I know Pete and Molly. They're nice, decent kids. There's got to be a reason for his being stabbed in the back. Besides too many people are interested in this for it to have been just a personal grudge killing."

"Those lobster people have been rowing with each other for years," Rourke said. "Why should they start killing now?"

"Don't you ever read the *news*?" the redhead indicated the pile of clippings. "Sure the fuss goes way back. There were a couple of other killings more than ten years ago. Mostly it's been just poachers robbing the regulars' trap lines. It's the easiest thievery I know. All the baited pots have to be marked by floats so the owner can find them himself."

"All a poacher has to do is pull them up before the owner gets there and put the lobsters into sacks or his own boat's bait well. He figures he won't be caught, or if he is, he can run or fight. The back-when killings were when somebody decided to fight. Trouble is things have stepped up in the last couple years. Way up. One of your own writers estimates the take by registered lobster men was off over sixty percent in the last year."

"That's a lot of lobsters to steal," Rourke commented.

"More than that," Shayne said. "It's a hell of a lot of lobsters to sell. Anybody can peddle a few lobsters to a restaurant through the back door. It goes on all the time. But this operation involves lobsters by the carload. There's got to be a big market involved."

"Lots of money, somebody with a political in. All that makes it big enough and hot enough to be worth killing about. I think maybe Petey Wright found out something that made him too hot to hold. So some big shot decided to drop him instead and ordered him killed."

"Put it that way and it begins to make sense," Rourke said. "You got any idea who's back of it?"

"Not yet," Shayne said. "I need lots more dope before I can even try an educated guess."

"I'll go back to the paper," Rourke said, "and make some calls. Maybe I can dig something up."

"Just be careful how you do it,"

Shayne said. "Somebody seems real anxious to keep the lid on. After all these years I'd hate to see you get your throat cut with a lobster claw."

"After all these years, Mike, you ought to know it'll take more than a lobster to cut my throat."

On his way out Rourke passed Lucy and Molly Wright coming up the stairs. The police car that had brought them was parked by the curb, and the uniformed driver looked relaxed for a long stay.

Molly was a pretty blonde wearing a not-quite-extreme mini skirt and one of those high piled hairdos that almost certainly wasn't all her own hair. She couldn't have been more than twenty-four or five. As Lucy led her into Shayne's office her face looked a lot older. She was a frightened young lady.

"Oh, Mr. Shayne," Molly said. "Can you really help me? I'm scared of what they'll do next."

"Who do you mean by they? Who had it in for Pete? That's what we have to figure out first of all."

She sat down across the desk from him. Lucy sat behind her and opened her steno's notebook. Shayne leaned back in his chair and pulled reflectively at the lobe of his left ear.

"Now just take it easy, honey," he said. "Nobody's going to get to you here. If you remember the right things we'll get to them first. Just tell me anything you can think of. Like a drink to calm you down?"

She shook her head. "No thanks.

Pete and I only drink when we're happy." Then she realized what she'd said and choked.

"That's better than most people," Shayne said to cover her embarrassment. "They think they've got to drink before they can get happy. Now let's start over."

"Pete's a good boy, a good man. He didn't make enemies. He was nice to people. It has to be somebody in the fishing business."

"Tell me about that," Shayne said. "Who are the people concerned?"

"There's our crowd," Molly explained. "Three years ago the regulars organized as the Biscayne Bay Lobster Fishermen's Association—the BBLFA. There's about thirty dues-paying members, and that's all the men who put out a string of more than four-six traps or so. Pete was one of the first to join, and he's been elected secretary every year. My Pete graduated from Miami High. He knows about keeping records and such things."

"Once they get a man can do that job," Shayne agreed, "they keep him in it as long as he'll stay."

"That's right. Leon Delgado's been president every year. Of course he runs four boats and over a hundred traps. He has the biggest fleet on the Bay."

"I've heard that name," Shayne said. "Has Delgado ever done time?"

"Almost," Molly said. "Not quite. He was arrested—a couple of times and charged with smuggling. His

daddy ran booze in the twenties and Leon knows all the passes through the flats and reefs. One time he shot a narcotics agent. Claimed he thought he was being hijacked, but nobody believed him. Lucky for him the man didn't die."

"Sounds like a tough character," Shayne said, "but he's on your side, isn't he?"

"Yes. Yes of course. Then there's the other gang. That is I mean the poachers. Pete was getting more and more worried about it. Of course there's always been poaching. We'd find empty traps that shouldn't have been empty. It's gotten worse though—a lot worse. Last year it cost us real money. Pete and Leon had begun to think maybe it was more than nogoods and wharf rats. Too much was stolen and too regularly, like the whole thing was an organized operation."

Shayne shot Lucy a glance to make sure she was taking it all down word for word.

"Whoever the poachers were," Molly said, "they operated like an army, like they followed orders. Pete thought somebody on our side was tipping them off. Whenever he and Leon set an ambush to try and catch some of them they stayed out of it. They used fast boats that ran away from our work boats. When our boys tried sinking the floats below water level and finding them by sighting on shore bearings it didn't work. Pete thought what they did

was trail a line between two boats and catch the float lines."

"Where did they sell the catch?" Shayne asked.

"That's another thing we couldn't figure out. Pete figured they stole barrels of legal lengths and shorts every day. The seafood restaurant people swore they weren't buying, but somebody had to be taking them. Otherwise why steal at all? Of course Pete wouldn't put it past any of the big wholesale houses to buy anything they could get at cut rate. They never did pin it down, though. We tried watching our trap locations through binoculars. Mostly the poaching was done in the night, and once in a while we got a look at them. The boats were small compared to ours, unmarked and fast. They dodged our people and outran them every time."

"How about the harbor police? Couldn't they help?"

"Oh," Molly said, "you know how that is. Miami Police have two patrol launches and most of the time they have to stay around the commercial port to stop pilfering and piracy. The county has three boats for a hundred miles of all sorts of shoreline. Mostly they cruise off the rows of hundred thousand dollar waterfront homes the rich live in. Burglars and heist men are always coming and going by water anyway. Besides, who cares about commercial fishermen?"

"The cops care," Shayne said. "They care a lot more than you

think. Chief Gentry will cooperate any way he can. Now — do you think maybe Pete had got onto something concerning the poachers' backers and was killed before he could talk?"

"That's what I think. Yes. But I got no idea what. He didn't tell me anyhow."

"Does the name Sam Duggan mean anything to you?"

She wrinkled her brow in thought. "Yes. I mean, I've heard Pete use it. I think he was a big buyer but I'm not sure who he was. Pete was always talking about somebody or other and I'm afraid most of the time I didn't listen too close."

"Hold on a minute, Mike," Lucy broke in. She took a fat manila envelope out of her bag and put it on the desk. "You'll probably find Sam Duggan in there. I almost forgot. Will Gentry asked me to give you this. Said it was stuff you'd asked for."

"Thanks, honey," the big redhead said. "I'll check it later. Anything else you can think of?"

"Well," Molly said, "it may not have nothing to do with the killing, but somebody was prowling around the house real late one night last week. I heard him in the bushes and woke Pete. You know how Pete is. He took his shotgun and a flashlight and went right out to look. Whoever it was heard him coming and got away. There was only some footprints in the mud where it'd

been raining. They was prints of rope-soled sandals."

"Mostly only Cubans wear those," Shayne said.

"Exactly. Mike, what do I do now? I'm scared."

Shayne tried to look as comforting as he could. "I'll take you home, and you lock yourself in and stay there. If you want to go out, you call Lucy here. If anybody bothers you, you've got Pete's shotgun. Fire two or three shots out the window, and the police will come fast. If he's breaking in, shoot him. You can shoot?"

"Pete taught me."

"Fine. Now let's go."

When they left the building the cop who'd brought Molly and Lucy from the station was still parked there. He signaled them over.

"The Chief told me to keep an eye on the lady," he said.

"Good," Shayne said. He gave the officer Molly's address. "I'm taking her home now. You follow, but not too close. I want to know if anyone else tries to tail us. When you get there, stake the place out and watch anybody who shows an interest in it. Okay?"

The patrolman was a nice looking young fellow. He gave Molly an appreciative look.

"You just count on me, lady," he said.

Pete and Molly had lived in a frame cottage behind an old stucco four unit apartment house on the Northeast side of town. The lot

was big and overgrown with hibiscus, crotoms, wild turk's cap and ancient grapefruit trees.

Molly Wright opened the front door with her latch key, but Shayne held her back while he went in first. He'd barely got over the threshold when a man who'd been standing with his back to the wall hit him with a crude blackjack.

Shayne had moved faster than the hood expected so the blow missed his head and came down on the left shoulder instead. Even at that it numbed his whole left arm and knocked him off balance. He could dimly see another man coming out of the bedroom. The blinds were down and the rooms were too dark for him to get a good look at either man.

Shayne threw himself forward and down, landing on the already hurt left side. As he did, he clawed for the gun he wore in a belt holster on the right side under his suit jacket. The first man started to swing his billy again, then saw the gun and thought better of it.

Outside the door Molly let out a wild scream and started to run back to the street. Shayne heard the young policeman yell in answer to her scream.

Both hoods heard the scream and answering yell. As well as seeing Shayne trying to get his gun free of holster and jacket, it was too much for them. The one by the front door jumped outside and bolted around the corner of the house into

the thick shrubbery. The second man ran from the bedroom to the kitchen, and so out the back door.

Shayne could have shot him as he ran, but held his fire instead. From the awkward sprawl he was in on the floor it would have been almost impossible to shoot accurately, and he didn't want to kill the man. After all neither man had shot at him.

The young Miami cop ran in the front door with a panic-stricken Molly at his heels. Shayne pointed to the kitchen door, and he ran on through, but too late to see even one of the men. He came back in and locked the door behind him.

"This is a city case," he told them. "I'll call the Chief. He'll want to stake out this house for your protection." He picked up the phone and found it dead.

"That's funny," Molly said. "They put in a new phone only a month ago."

"They," Shayne said. "Who's they?"

"The company, I guess. The man who brought it and took the old one away was in a regular truck."

The young cop and Shayne looked at each other. "You've a special shield," the young fellow said. "Technically you need a warrant, but I won't see what you do." He looked out the window.

Shayne pulled himself painfully off the floor.

"You never saw me do this," he told Molly. Then he picked the

phone out of its cradle and unscrewed the speaker plate. In a few minutes he found and extracted the small, rectangular object he was looking for. He put it on the floor and stamped his heel down hard to flatten it out.

"I hope somebody was listening and I broke his ear drum," he said. To the cop: "The installer's probably a regular phone company employee who moonlights this sort of thing on the side. If you can find out his name they'll fire him, but it won't stop him."

"What was that?" Molly asked.

"A bug," Shayne told her. "A little microphone that broadcast every word spoken in this room, over the phone or not. It could be picked up by a tape recorder or a microphone tuned to it anywhere within six or seven blocks of here."

"Oh my God no!" Molly was horrified.

"What is it?" the cap asked. "What'd your husband say over this thing?"

"Not him," she said, and had the grace to blush. "My girl friend and me. We talk every day. She was asking me — well, personal questions, like how to get her husband interested . . . like that. You know what I mean. Imagine somebody listening or taping all I said."

Shayne laughed in spite of the pain in his shoulder.

"Don't worry, honey," he said. "Whoever manned that bug was no

innocent. He knew the facts of life already, and that wasn't the sort of thing he'd be listening for."

He sent the young cop down to the pay phone on the corner. The living room and bedroom had been partly torn up where the intruders had searched for something. Shayne pulled out the central drawer of the desk and checked the contents. Nothing of interest. Then he turned the drawer over and looked at the bottom. Still nothing. He ran his hand into the slot the drawer had come out of and felt the underside of the desk top. Then he knew he had it.

"Honey," he said to Molly, "go take a look and see if that cop's on his way back yet."

While she was looking out the door he ripped loose the object taped to the desk top. It was a small black notebook, the sort you can buy in the dime store to keep addresses in. Shayne put it in an inside jacket pocket. He went on searching the desk.

"Hey," the young cop said, coming through the front door. "You know I can't let you do that, Mr. Shayne. You've got too much of a rep for holding out evidence."

"Why son," the redhead said. "I'm shocked. You know I wouldn't do a thing like that."

"Whether you would or wouldn't the search waits till a detective detail gets here. You want to wait too."

"No," Shayne said. "The young

lady's in good hands. I'll trust Will Gentry to keep her safe. You tell him he can reach me at my office if the department needs any help."

He walked back to his car and drove to the office.

III

LUCY HAMILTON had a couple of thick roast beef sandwiches and a pot of coffee so strong you could almost stand a spoon in it. He laced the coffee with a shot of brandy and fell to. "Thanks. I forgot about lunch."

"While you were gone," Lucy said, "I looked through the stuff Gentry sent over.

"You knew I meant you should."

"Most of it was just a rerun of what Molly already told us. One thing, though. Sam Duggan is buyer for Southern Fish Shippers, Incorporated, and generally ramrods the whole of their operation. That mean anything to you?"

"Mean anything?" Shayne said. "It means plenty. Southern Fish is Old Nick Nicopolis, lock stock and barrel. They don't call him Old Nick with a capital 'O' because of his white hair either. People think he's like the character of the same name with the horns and tail. If that's who Pete was bucking, he was on borrowed time from the beginning."

"You think that's the answer, Mike?"

"I don't know. Right now it looks



almost too pat an answer. This looks just too easy."

"If it'll help any," Lucy said, "Duggan has a record for strong-arm. He was tried once for involuntary manslaughter, but Judge Fender turned him loose on a technicality. You can figure he's a pretty rough boy."

"Par for this course," Shayne said nursing his sore left shoulder.

The phone rang and Lucy picked it up. "Michael Shayne Detective Agency. Yes, it's me, Captain. I'll see if he's come in yet."

Shayne nodded to her and she passed him the instrument.

"Shayne here," he said. "Is that you, Ryan?"

"It is," came the answer. "Mike, we want whatever it was you found and took out of here."

"What makes you think I took anything out of there?"

"Patrolman Haddon made the mistake of leaving you in there while

he went out. The prowlers were looking for something. This place's ripped apart. We don't think they found it before you all came on them. We know we haven't found anything since. You've borrowed things before. So —."

"You can't bust me on suspicion," Shayne said. "Tell you what, Captain, I'll promise that anything at all I find that I know applies to this case will get to your hands. That satisfy you?"

"No," Ryan said. "It doesn't. We're going to leave a stake-out for Mrs. Wright's protection, though I don't really think anyone'll be back here. Whatever it was they were after, they either got it or will figure we did. Remember now — if you found any evidence, we want it right now."

"I'll remember," Mike Shayne said and hung up. He was just following a pattern of long standing. The police could have the evidence when he was through with it. If nobody else knew what he had, there couldn't be any leaks of information.

Meanwhile, he decided, he'd better find out just what it was he did have. He told Lucy to go on home and get a rest and fix herself some dinner. He'd call her later if he needed her.

When she'd gone he took out the little black book that had been hidden in Pete Wright's desk. The pages of the little book were alphabetized for listing names, but it obviously hadn't been used for that

purpose. Pete had started at the front and filled about half the pages with what was either a code or a personal shorthand of his own devising. A typical page read: "D. 14.50?DS.1000BB.no. up up up. less 60 lbs. DL 5 G." The other pages were covered with similarly cryptic notation. The letters could be pure code, the initials of people Pete dealt with, or they could be meaningless and just put in for the sake of obscurity.

Shayne tugged his left ear lobe and tried a simple test for code on the first couple of pages. It didn't check out. He knew he wasn't going to get anywhere without more information than he already possessed.

He heard footsteps in the hall, the click of a woman's spike heels on the ancient wood flooring, and a good firm knock on the office door.

"Come in," he called. "It's unlocked." As he spoke he shoved the notebook under some mail in his desk drawer and closed the drawer.

She had long, firm legs, small hands and feet and a piled mass of raven-wing hair. She could have been anywhere from forty-five to fifty-five, but care had kept her figure without bulge or wrinkled skin. A bra and girdle kept her breasts high and her stomach flat.

Above all, her manner, her walk, her every cell and atom were permeated with a vibration that was pure feminine sexuality. This wo-

man would have been a standout in a beauty contest, a royal court or a subway rush-hour crowd.

"I talked to your secretary earlier," she said, and Shayne knew what Lucy had meant by a "woman with a sexy voice."

"She gave me your message about Peter Wright. Do you know who killed him?"

She picked up the opened bottle of brandy off the top of Lucy's desk, found the empty glass in the typewriter well and poured herself a good four fingers. She didn't even flinch when she took a swallow of the fiery liquor. Then she pulled a chair to the corner of Shayne's desk, crossed her legs and coolly appraised him.

"Well?" Shayne said.

"I want to know what sort of man you really are before I talk," she said in her low, throaty voice. "I've heard of you, but I prefer to trust my own intuitions."

"Who are you?" Shayne said. "I need to know who I am talking to."

"Just call me Rose," she said. "I was christened Rosa, but nobody's called me that for years."

"Not since you married —." He left it unfinished and waited for her to fill in the name.

The black, soft eyes looked almost huge as they looked straight into his. She held his glance almost hypnotically. "Why do you think I'm married."

"I'm a detective," Shayne said. "Your hands show you don't work.

They're too soft even for an office. Your clothes and cosmetics are expensive and well chosen, but not high society type. If anyone as beautiful as you are was in the rackets, I'd know you or of you. So a husband supports you. On the other hand you wouldn't broadcast desire the way you do if the marriage was a happy one."

Rose didn't change expression in any way or shift her eyes from his.

"You are a detective," she said. "Can you name me too?"

"No," he said. "You'll have to tell me before we can talk."

"I guess that's fair enough," she said. "If I want you to work for me, you'll have to know. I'm Rose Delgado, Leon's wife. You know who Leon is?"

"Yesterday I didn't but today I do."

"That's how I knew Pete Wright. He was always coming to the house to talk to Leon. He was a nice boy. I want to know who killed him."

"Just because he was a nice boy?" Shayne asked.

"No," she said. "There's more to it than that. You know about the lobster war. You know Leon's in it right up to the ears, and Pete was Leon's secretary. Whoever kills one of them could want to kill the other." She spoke calmly enough but the dark eyes clouded and the tightly-bound breasts rose where she breathed deeply.

"How well did you really know Pete?" Shayne asked.

Rose Delgado knew what he really meant, but chose to ignore it. "Well enough. Or maybe not well enough. It isn't important, or for you to judge. I'll pay you five thousand dollars for the arrest of his killer."

She took a sealed envelope out of her purse and passed it to Shayne.

"This is a thousand dollars for retainer and advance on expenses," she said. "Just tell me if you need more."

He put the envelope in his desk unopened. "If I decide to accept this, how do I reach you?"

"You don't, Mike. I reach you."

"Don't you trust me then?"

"As much as I trust anybody I've just met. That's not the reason. Our phone's probably bugged. You know how that is."

He changed the subject. "You told my secretary Pete only got what he asked for. Just what did you mean by that? If I'm going to do a job here, I'll have to know the facts."

"Money," she said, but her eyes were too bitter for that to be all of it. "All of a sudden Pete Wright had money. Too much and too fast. He wasn't breaking even on the lobsters. None of them have this season."

"Where was it coming from?"

"I'm not sure. Or maybe I am sure but I can't prove it. You know who sits around this poker table using lobsters for chips? How much do you know, Mike?" She finished

her brandy and watched him. He passed her the bottle, and she poured another four fingers.

"I'm learning," he said. "There's Leon and his people. There's Old Nick and Duggan. There are independent poachers — and some I don't think are independent. And there's somebody with political weight. I don't have that name yet."

"I do," she said, "and I'll give it to you. You'd find out anyway. It's Barney Brill. Now do I have to draw a picture?"

Barney Brill, Shayne thought. B.B. — Big Bribery. Brill was an official of one of the biggest, toughest and most aggressive unions in the country. He had a reputation for getting whatever he wanted and wanting whatever he could grasp. Whether or not the rumors that he'd come into labor by way of the crime syndicate were true, Shayne knew him to be thoroughly ruthless and unscrupulous. A man like that could buy murder or a new suit with the same lack of emotion.

"I know Barney Brill," the redhead said. "I know who he is, and he's big time. Why would he care about a gaggle of lobster trappers?"

She laughed and leaned forward, dropping her voice. He could smell the strong perfume she wore.

"Oh, Mike Shayne," she said. "You're a student of human nature. Don't you know there's nothing at all too small for a really acquisitive man to grab? Don't you know that's a hunger that is never sated? Be-

sides the lobster men are the key to the Bay. Suppose they and the mackerel fishermen, and the charter and party boat people, and the wharf pirates, and river rats, and the speed-boat heist men were all made part of one team. The man behind them would own the Bay. Do you see?"

"It's a picture," Shayne said. "I don't like it, but I see it. What I don't see is Pete Wright in that picture."

"I said money, Mike. Money." She put her hand over his on the desk, and her fingers were dry and hot. "Mike, Petey had more money than he should, and all of a sudden somebody was tipping the poachers to every move we made."

"Would that make Brill want him dead? He wasn't double-dealing Brill."

"The double-agent is trusted by nobody," she said. "Besides I don't care." There was a terrible loneliness and choke in her voice. "I want to know. Even if it's Leon."

"He'd be a logical candidate," Shayne said, pulling his hand free of hers. "But it all hinges on Pete actually being a louse, and I don't see him in that part. I've known the boy since he was a kid, and he's a good man. No genius maybe, but never mixed up with hoods. What makes you think he got money from somebody? Wouldn't his wife know?"

"Probably not," she said. "I can prove what I say, Mike. There's a boat tied up at the Flamingo Marina



in the Park. Search it — it's the *Bonnie Babe* — and see what you find. Check out the registry. Then I'll talk to you again."

She stood up, and so did Shayne. She stepped so close that her breasts touched his chest. The heat and fragrance of her were almost solid to the touch. He took a step back, but she moved with him by instinct.

"Remember, Mike," she said. "Remember. Five thousand for his name." She moved forward till her lips almost touched his. "Ten thousand for his death."

The effect of her nearness was so overpowering that afterwards Shayne could never be quite sure if she'd actually kissed him or not. Then she stepped back and away from him with fluid grace.

The door opened and Tim Rourke came in from the hallway.

"Remember, Mike," she said. "When you've checked it out, then I'll call you." She picked up her purse and went out of the room.

"Well, well," Rourke said. "Now don't let me interrupt anything really important, Mike."

"If it was that important, I wouldn't let you," Shayne said.

Tim Rourke picked the brandy bottle off the desk, measured the contents with his eye and poured a generous libation into the glass that still sported a smear of Rose Delgado's lipstick.

"Sometimes I think you're aging faster than me, Mike," he said. "Our value systems used to be almost the same. Now you let a creature like that walk out just because I come in. I don't know what motivates you any more. Who was that anyway, and what did she want?"

The big redhead started laughing.

"Just before you came in, Tim," he said, "what you call my value system was turning cartwheels. She wants me to think Pete Wright was her lover. Also she wants to hire me to kill somebody for her. She'll tell me who when she thinks I ought to know, I guess. Right now she's just pointing me at him."

"Fascinating," Rourke agreed, downing his drink. "The lady wouldn't by any chance be named Betty Brill? Would she now?"

"She wouldn't," Shayne said and watched Rourke's eyebrows lift in surprise. "Still you do raise an interesting point. What brought that particular name to mind?"

"The power of the press," Rourke

said. "It's like a crystal ball. Sooner or later it'll tell you anything—let you look into any secret at all. During my afternoon of research—research for you, remember—the names of Barney and Betty Brill came up."

"Barney's been lobster trapping," Shayne said. "I know that already. Who's Betty and what about her?"

"She's his wife, and the grapevine says she's been trapping too. Not lobsters. Lobstermen, or one in particular, anyway."

"The handsome young man wearing the fish grains in his back, I suppose."

"Precisely. Just so. The same handsome lad whose ardor now cools on a slab in Sheriff Burdick's morgue."

"I'm not ready to believe it," Shayne said. "I know that boy. At least I did as long as he was there to be known."

"You know I wouldn't kid you, Mike, and I'm not the easiest reporter in town to sell a phony story to. I have contacts who've seen the pair of them together in bars and in her car. These are people whose word and judgment I can trust. They've been around together."

Shayne was still unconvinced. "You bring me somebody who saw them both in the same bed at the same time," he said, "and maybe—just maybe—I'll admit it was love that made the wheels go round. Dammit, Tim. It just doesn't make sense."

"Maybe it should," Rourke said. "Bigshot's wives have been known to get hungry for fresh excitement before this. And handsome young man get dazzled by the shine off neon tubes and diamonds and such. Like that last drink before the bar closes. It can make some real dogs look like Miss America. Not that Betty Brill's any dog either. From what they say she's in danger of being attacked every time she passes the statue of Columbus in Bayfront Park."

"If you're right, which I don't for a minute admit," Shayne said, "is your idea that Barney found out and came in from the wings shooting—or at least spearing?"

"Nope," Rourke said. "I'll admit that's what I thought at first, but it just doesn't check. My sources say Barney may or may not know what's burning. If he does, he doesn't seem to care. It's funny, because he's been jealous enough in the past to put a couple of boys into cement overcoats for dating her. Now, what do you know about it?"

"Not very much," Shayne said. "Not as much as I'd like by a country mile. The black-haired beauty you kept from seducing me says Barney Brill wants to organize the lobstermen. Something to do with setting himself up as admiral of Biscayne Bay. Could be he was just dangling his Betty under the noses of honest, unsophisticated fisher lads for bait. Like you, I don't know."

"What's the next step then?"

"I'm going down to Flamingo," Shayne said. "Black Beauty says I'll hit pay dirt there. If you want to ride along, I'll post you up on the way. How about it?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Tim Rourke said.

IV

FLAMINGO USED TO be a fishing port, and one of the toughest towns since God pushed Port Royal under sixty feet of salt water. There'd been a bar, a general store, and about twenty frame shacks along the beach. There was an old pine wharf painted brown, but old timers swore the color came from blood soaked into the timbers. It was that sort of town.

When all the southern Everglades became a national park the citizens of Flamingo were summarily dispossessed. They were all squatters anyway, with no claim to ownership. There was much cursing and howling, but only Old Man Asbury actually tried to defy the federal authority. He forted up in his shack, set over the water on pilings. With him he had a hound dog, a shotgun, three gallons of Bahamian rum and his latest woman.

The park rangers refused to make a full scale siege of it. All they did was shut off the pipe that brought him his only supply of fresh water. Old Man made out on rum for two days before the heat got him. He and his woman and his dog were

taken to Florida City in a truck and turned loose with \$18.75 contributed by kind-hearted rangers. Not a shot had been fired.

All the old shacks were burned off and bulldozed to splinters. A benevolent Washington used some of Shayne's income tax money to put up motels, a museum, a restaurant and souvenir shop complex, a movie theater, ranger headquarters and several beautiful acres of concrete parking lot. The whole thing made Shayne sad whenever he saw it.

Shayne's designedly undistinguished looking car had a good motor which he kept tuned to its maximum performance level. He threaded the traffic south on U.S. One with the ease born of long familiarity. After the turn-off at Florida City there were country roads to the park entrance.

After dark at that time of year the toll gate was unmanned and residents, soldiers from the missile batteries in the swamp, and other interested parties could come and go freely.

Mike Shayne and Tim Rourke came as fast as they could, and that was doing at least seventy. The forty miles of Park road were all two-laned and kept in top condition. Near the entrance to Mahogany Hammock a car passed them going north so fast it was almost flying. It was an expensive red convertible. In the second or two when the car was full in their headlights they saw

the driver was a woman. A mop of brightly dyed red hair stood almost straight out behind her head as the wind of motion whipped and tangled it. Then she was gone.

A few minutes later they pulled into Flamingo Center. The place was in chaos. Tourists were packed in solid ranks around the marina docks, and over their heads Shayne could see the flashing lights of a fire engine and an ambulance. Heavy smoke pierced by a few dying tongues of flame billowed up into the night.

"I think we're too late," the big detective said, "but let's see what we can find out anyway."

Rourke took a *Miami News* press pass out of his jacket pocket and showed it to one of the rangers holding back the thundering herd of tourists. The man motioned them through.

On the dock itself things were apparently in charge of a big, soft-spoken sergeant of rangers. One of the boats, a beautiful, all white, forty foot charter boat with second wheel aloft and harpoon pulpit at the bow, had caught fire and sunk at the dock.

Shayne cursed under his breath. "What's happened here?" Rourke asked and showed the sergeant his credentials.

The man read them in the light of a flash.

"We're not exactly sure, Sir," he said politely. "As you can see one of the boats has sunk at its mooring.

We believe it was caused by an explosion of some sort. Fortunately we don't think anybody was aboard."

"Where was the owner when it happened?"

"We don't know that. The boat was only brought in a few days ago. Whoever brought it was probably just hired to do the job. He paid dockage for a month in advance and took the bus to Homestead. Never even left a name or address."

"You said explosion?" Rourke asked him. "What sort of explosion?"

"It will take a while to—"

"Dynamite," Shayne told them.

He'd been at the edge of the dock where the boat rested in barely six feet of water with most of the superstructure still exposed. "Gas fumes or anything of that sort would have blown out the decking from below. On the other hand the force of a dynamite blast goes down, not up. A bundle of sticks touched off below would blow the bottom out of her and sink her fast. Wasn't that what happened?"

"Yes, it was."

"Were you on the dock at the time, Sergeant?"

"No, sir," he said. "The only one actually here aside from a couple of owners on their own boats was the regular attendant. He's the one over there by the fire engine."

"Uh—just one more thing. What did you say the name of the boat was?" Rourke said.



"You want to bet it wasn't the *Bonnie Babe*?" Mike Shayne said under his breath so the sergeant didn't hear him.

"I did notice that," the man said. "I'd never seen this particular charter boat before, and she was a real beauty. It's the *Bonnie Babe* out of Miami."

Mike Shayne and Tim Rourke went to talk to the dock attendant. The magic name of the *News* opened his mouth at once. They got the story in several hundred poorly chosen words. It didn't differ from the account the ranger had already given them. Most of it centered on the fruitless heroism of the attendant in emergency.

"Anybody else on the dock at the time?" Shayne asked.

"Not right when she blew," the man said. "Just me. A little before that though there was a broad—a woman." He paused to scan his memory. "I remember because there was a real dish, a living doll."

"Tell me more," Shayne said. "Can you describe her?"

"About my height," the attendant said. "In a fluffy dress and curved—all curves and all the right ones. Red hair. Man, would I like to—"

"Cheer up," Shayne said, "maybe you will some day if you say your prayers and are good to your kiddies. Come on, Tim. We got places to go."

"I missed my dinner," Rourke said. "Let's eat in the restaurant here. The speed she was going we'll never catch her anyway."

"I don't think she blows up a boat every day," Shayne said. "It'll shake her up and we'll catch up to her at a bar. Then we eat."

"Wait a minute," Rourke said. Shouldn't somebody here have a record of ownership of that boat?"

"We can check it at Miami," Shayne said. "She was registered and inspected by the Coast Guard there. Right now finding that woman's the most important thing."

They pushed Shayne's car to the limit going back the way they'd come. Once out of the park they passed several bars in or near Florida City. No red convertible was parked at any of them.

"It'll take an hour to scout the Homestead bars and taverns," Rourke observed.

"For now forget it," Shayne said. "This is a big city girl. My hunch is she'll want to get back under cover in Miami, so she'll stick to the highway. Somewhere along the

way the need for a drink'll get too strong. That's when we'll catch up."

They watched the parking lots of all the bars fronting on the north-bound traffic lanes figuring there was no reason for the woman to cross over. Once they saw a red car and went into the parking lot only to learn from the parking attendant that it had been driven in by a fat man who was a regular customer.

Then they saw what had to be the right convertible parked openly in front of a sprawling frame building which proclaimed itself the Pioneer Lounge.

"Pioneers seldom lounge," Shayne said. "I'll go in and talk to her. You try and get close enough to overhear. And watch my back in case she's got friends."

Shayne spotted the woman they wanted as soon as he entered the long room. She sat by herself at one end of the half empty bar. She had an open bottle in front of her and was pouring three fingers into a highball glass. Apparently she didn't need ice or mixer.

She was younger than he thought, expensively dressed, and with the same air of vibrant sexuality which had impressed him in Rose Delgado. Heavy makeup and the dyed red hair made her seem both hard and competent in all the wrong things.

He walked down and took the bar stool at her right.

"Does it help, Red?" he said without preamble.

He got a cold stare from brown eyes. "Get lost, buster."

The bartender, who stood about six-four with shoulders the same width eased down the length of his bar. "You want I should get rid of him, Miss Betty?" he said, examining Shayne with distaste.

"I just came from Flamingo," Shayne told them both without any special emphasis. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tim Rourke come through the front door and stop while his eyes adjusted to the dim light.

"It ain't where you came from," the bartender said. "It's where you're going if you bother this here lady."

"I was down at the dock," Shayne finished. He was estimating his chances of snatching the bottle off the bar and knocking the big man out. They weren't very good.

The woman got him off the hook.

"Oh, let him stay, Bill," she said. "He hasn't really been fresh. Maybe talking will help me wake up."

The barkeep was dubious. "If you say so, Miss Betty. You change your mind, just whistle and I'll massacre him. Anytime you say." He went back up the bar to serve Tim Rourke.

The woman gave Shayne a long, direct looking over.

"Draw me a picture," she said.

"No fooling around," Mike Shayne said. "I like that. You bombed the *Bonnie Babe*. It had to be you. You were seen."

"If I'd been there at all—which

I don't admit—it was just to get a breath of fresh air. My husband's lawyers will tell you that."

Shayne said, "Of course they will, Mrs. Brill. Just save that part till the police question you."

Her eyes widened—he couldn't tell whether with fear or relief. "You're not a cop?"

Shayne passed her one of his business cards and waited while she read it. She hadn't denied being Betty Brill.

"A shamus," she said. "Now what in hell is a private eye doing worrying about a burned-out charter boat?" She took a drink and passed the bottle to Shayne. He drank from the neck, but stopped most of the liquor with his tongue.

"What are you after?" she asked.

Shayne gave her the answer he thought she'd be most likely to believe. "I've been promised five grand if I can identify a killer."

"Money, money," she said. "Money makes the world go round. Is that enough for risking your neck, Shamus Shayne?"

"Only a starter," Shayne said. "I can make it ten grand if I bring in his head as well as his name. That should give you an idea how serious my client is."

"That's a high price," she said. "Whose killer is worth that much?"

"We needn't play games," Shayne said. "Let's just suppose it could be Pete Wright."

She took another drink from her glass and forgot the chaser this time.

"Just so we'll have a name to bandy about, okay. Who did kill him, Mike? Who really did?"

"I don't know for sure," he admitted. "Not yet, but I will. One source says you did."

She gave him another of those eyeball-to-eyeball looks. "Don't believe it, Mike. Don't you believe it. There's plenty I'd like to have done with that young man, but to kill him wasn't one of them. No. I'll swear I didn't kill him."

"Somebody's willing to swear you did. Can you prove you didn't? For instance, whose name was *Bonnie Babe* registered in?"

"You can find out easy enough," she said. "It was in the name of Peter Wright."

"And how did he get the money for a fifty thousand dollar boat?"

"All paid for in cash too," she said. "I'll level with you, Mike. He didn't. My husband paid for that boat."

"Barney bought it!" Shayne was surprised and let it show. "Barney? Not you?"

She laughed at him. "Not me, shamus. You can check that too, or your friend Chief Gentry can. Just go up to Barton Marina, and make them show you the record. The *Babe* had nothing to do with Pete and me. It was all Barney's idea, and don't ask me what sort of idea because he didn't tell me. Barney can be funny that way. Now are you satisfied?"

"Not quite, Mrs. Brill. Two more

questions. Where does Nick Nicopolis come in? Why was the *Babe* bombed and sunk?"

"My," she said. "You want to know lots of things, don't you? I like an outspoken man, Shayne. I could like you a lot once the shock of Pete wears off—in a week or two. But how much do you like me? Enough to believe my answers?"

"Now," Shayne said, "you're talking about trusting, not liking. I'll check them out, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean. So I'll tell you the truth where you could check it out."

Shayne grinned and waited. In spite of himself he was beginning to like the woman.

"You dig around," she said, "and you'll find Old Nick would like a monopoly of fresh caught lobster in South Florida. He figures there's money in it and he's right. Some say he's organized the poachers to drive the regular lobstermen out. Some say the poachers are on his payroll now—they're nothing but a crew working for him. Barney found out he was the one buying in the illegal catch. It's shipped north and West in refrigerator cars to keep from showing up as a glut on the Miami market. It's possible Pete was catching on and was killed to shut him up." She stopped.

"You bombed the *Babe*," Shayne said. "It would help if I knew why."

"Sure it would," she said. "It would help me tell you if I knew

the answer to that one myself. I don't. Oh, I guess you won't believe me—but would I tell a lie that hard to swallow? Am I that clumsy, Shayne?"

"Tell me more before I decide," Shayne said.

"All I know is that this morning when Barney heard Pete was dead he blew his top for sure. I thought he'd go right through the penthouse roof. I couldn't tell for sure whether he was mad or scared. Then he told me to drive down and blow the boat after dark. At the dinner hour, when most people would be off the dock. He fixed the bundle of whammo himself and showed me how to set the detonator. I just did what he told me."

"Just like that?" Shayne said. "You're asking me to believe a man as big as Barney Brill sent his own wife to blow a boat that could be traced to him. I don't think anybody could make up that one. Maybe you could. But why? Why should he do it that way? There's plenty of goons on the payroll know more about thunder sticks than you do."

"I wondered myself, shamus," Betty said. "I think he was afraid of something that might have been hid on board."

"Hidden by whom? Did Pete Wright use that boat?"

"Too many questions," she said suddenly. "I'm getting a little drunk and I never answer questions when I'm drunk. I'll think it over and call you tomorrow. Or maybe you ought

to earn your fee by yourself. Now run on and pick up your pal from the *News* on your way out."

Shayne hadn't known she'd seen and recognized Tim Rourke. The reporter had realized he couldn't get close enough to listen in while they were isolated at the end of the bar. It would have been too obvious.



Now he was at one of the tables drinking with a middle-aged blonde in a tight green dress.

Mike Shayne could tell by the set of Betty Brill's jaw that she really meant it about no more answers that night. "It's been a real pleasure, Mrs. Brill. I'll be in touch."

"In touch?" she said. "Close touch is best. Yes, you keep in touch."

Ordinarily Shayne mightn't have let go so easily, but he knew the giant bartender was shooting hostile looks his way. He went by the table to collect Rourke and they walked out to his car.

When they got there he looked the car over with a fast appraisal. It was a habit he'd started years back, just as he habitually checked the rear seat and floor before sliding behind the wheel. Most people don't. Heist men and killers count on it. This time the safety check paid off. The hood of his car must

have been raised and the catch failed to lock properly when it was lowered again.

Shayne motioned Rourke to stand clear, and very carefully raised the hood again. There were no wires attached to it, but inside, wired to the ignition system, was a small tin box. Shayne undid the connection and looked into the box. So did Rourke.

"Some of the new plastic explosive," Rourke decided. "Somebody wants us out of this, old friend."

"Yeah," Shayne said. "Probably be safer if you took a cab, Tim."

He spun on his heel and went back into the bar. Betty Brill was no longer in evidence. The big drink jockey was. Shayne went over and put the bomb down on the mahogany in front of him.

"Just tell Mrs. Brill I won't be needing this after all," he said. "Tell her I'm disappointed in her. I really am."

The barkeep said: "I don't know no Mrs. Brill." From the careful way he handled the bomb when he picked it up and put it under the bar Shayne could tell well enough that he knew, or guessed what it was.

He went back outside just as Rourke finished searching the rest of the car. He'd opened the trunk with Shayne's key and gotten down on his hands and knees in the gravel to inspect the underbody.

"All clear," he said, standing up

and knocking gravel off his pants knees and palms. "At least, I think so."

"They wouldn't likely waste two bundles on a small car," Shayne said. "Let's go."

On the road north to Miami he brought Rourke up to date on the conversation with Betty Brill, or at least the broad outlines of what she'd said.

"You believe all that?" Rourke asked.

"Some of it," Shayne admitted. "Some parts have to be lies. The trouble is I don't know yet which. It'll help a lot when I get that figured."

They were silent for a couple of miles while the neon signs got closer together and the traffic thickened.

"Your friend Pete must have been a real lover," Rourke said finally. "Every woman you find in this thing claims to have had him in the feathers. It doesn't sound like the nice clean All-American Boy you had me expecting."

"It doesn't sound like Pete Wright either," Shayne said.

"Why should they claim it if it wasn't so?" Rourke said. "Both those beauties have husbands. Both the husbands are tough, and either one could decide his wife needed a lesson."

"What does that prove, Tim?"

"I don't know what it proves, but it gives me ideas. Each of the women might be trying to finger the husband or the other girl's. Then

again, suppose Pete was rollicking with one fair dame and the other one found out about it. You really think either one of that pair would hesitate to knock him off? I don't."

"You're forgetting how he died," Shayne said. "Women don't go out before dawn and use a fish spear in the middle of the Bay. At least I never knew one to do it yet."

"There's always a first time. Besides they didn't have to kill him themselves. The town's full of contract men."

"That sort of thing just doesn't fit Pete Wright," Shayne said.

He dropped Rourke at the south-east high-rise apartment building he called home. From long experience he knew the reporter would earn an exclusive on the story by not printing anything in advance that might hamper Shayne.

V

WHEN SHAYNE DROVE up to his office it was after midnight. In spite of the hour there were lights burning. Both venetian blinds and the heavy drapes Lucy Hamilton had insisted on hanging were drawn tightly so he couldn't see who was there.

But Shayne figured an enemy would have waited in the dark, and went right on in. Lucy Hamilton was there. She had the coffee pot boiling and was pouring another cup for Chief Will Gentry. When

Shayne sat down she brought a hot mug of the brew for him.

"Hello, Mike," Gentry said. "I figured you'd be along soon."

"What's on your mind, Chief?"

"Lots of things, but I'll try to take them one at a time. Have you got the Pete Wright case wrapped up?"

"Not yet," Shayne said and took a mouthful of hot coffee. "Not yet, but I'm making progress. There seems to be plenty of killers standing in line for this one."

"That's what my boys say. Now what happened tonight at Flamingo? The park's federal land of course but we got a routine report. It said you showed up as if you'd expected it to blow. It also gave the dockman's description of a woman who could be Mrs. Barney Brill."

"I'm pretty sure that's who she was," Shayne said.

"In that case what's she doing blowing up fifty grand of her old man's money? Why do it herself? And did Pete Wright own that boat?"

"Why don't you ask her?" Shayne said. "She'd tell you as much as she would me."

"We haven't found her yet," Gentry explained. "I called Barney, and he said see his lawyers in the morning. Where did you get the tip to look into that boat anyhow?"

"Just a hunch," Shayne said. "Anyway you know I got there too late to go aboard. The rangers will have told you that."

"So they have. You couldn't have bombed her either. My people think the only reason to sink the boat was that something in or on her would point to the killer. Until I talked to the rangers I thought maybe you'd managed to get ahold of whatever it was. But they say you couldn't have gotten there in time. Because of the murder angle they're going to raise the wreck and search what's left of her."

"Good," Shayne said. "I hope they find something. I honestly do."

"What have you got, Mike?" Gentry asked. "I don't mean off the boat necessarily. Bill Ryan thinks you got something at the Wright shack. Is it what they wanted?"

"I haven't said I got anything anywhere," Shayne said, and held out his mug for Lucy to refill. "You might let the impression get around though. If the killer thinks I've found what he's looking for, he'll come to me just as fast as if I really did have it. Then we'll know who he is."

"You want to make yourself bait again," Gentry said, "and I'm not going along with it. Someday a smart rat's going to figure how to spring your trap and eat the bait. Mike, we've got a whole police department to handle these things. Let us do our job."

"A police secret is no secret at all," Shayne said. "You know it as well as I do, Will. Your office may not be bugged but your department is. Somebody with big money's in this thing. He can buy the news, and

he'll know every move you make. On the other hand that kind will think he can handle me. When I know who it is, or have court-proof evidence, I'll dump him in your lap. Until then I think I can do better alone than as part of the force."

"You're a pig-headed nut," Gentry said. "Some day you'll go too far and get your fool head shot off. I don't want to see it."

"He's right, Michael," Lucy said. "Why don't you give him what you have."

"Because I don't have it yet," Shayne said. "When I've got a case, Will, I'll put it on your desk."

Lucy sighed. "Suppose you get a bullet in the head before you get your case?"

Shayne laughed. "That'll at least be one murder the police can solve without any interference from me. Now I'll give them another. I mean Nicopolis of Southern Fish Shippers. I hear he's been buying from lobster poachers and shipping their catch out of here. Somebody also thinks we ought to know where his ramrod, Sam Duggan, was at the time of the killing. How about it, Will?"

"Where did you get it?" the Chief asked.

"You know that's privileged information. Will you check it out?"

"Okay, I'll have it gone into. Also I'll let the word slip that we think you're withholding evidence. God knows everybody in this town believes you do it on every case you work. The killer probably has it

gured out for himself by now. A
bol if he hasn't."

Shayne sent Lucy and the Chief
ut and went over to his apartment
otel to bed. He had iron grilles on
he windows and a special lock for
he door, so he slept quickly and
bundly.

He was awake shortly after seven
he next morning and showered and
haved first thing. Then he put on
lacks and an expensive but con-
ervative sports shirt, loose enough
o cover a .38 in an under-the-waist-
and holster, and started to fix him-
self some breakfast. The bacon was
rained on paper towelling and the
ggs about done when he heard the
partment doorbell ring. Someone
ushed it impatiently several times
n a row.

Shayne turned the gas off under
he eggs, put a couple of slices of
read in the toaster and set the con-
rol. After that he looked through
he bull's eye of one-way glass in
he door.

At first he didn't recognize her in
navy blue slack suit and with a
lark print scarf hiding the mass of
ed hair. When he did, he opened
he door.

"Come on in," he said. "Break-
ast's about ready. I'll put on more
ggs."

Betty Brill stood just inside the
oor and sniffed the mingled arom-
s coming from the kitchen.

"I didn't think there was a man
eft who'd take the trouble to cook
or himself," she said. Then, with



a sudden change of mood, "Now
search me, Mike Shayne. A good
thorough frisk while you're about it."

"What in the name of—"

"Oh, don't be stupid. I won't
come in till you're absolutely sure
I'm not bringing any bombs with
me. I'm not kidding. Search me or
I won't tell you what you want to
know."

Shayne took her at her word. He
looked in the expensive shoulder
bag she was wearing and then patted
the appropriate places where a gun
or knife might be hidden. Nothing.

Betty smiled at him. "That could
get habit-forming. Mike, did you
honestly think I'd bomb your car?
I swear it wasn't me. Whoever it
was was trespassing right on my own
doorstep, and I don't like that. Bar-
ney has the word out to find out
who did it. You believe me when I
say it wasn't me?"

"I believe you," he said. "I'm not
sure just why, but I do believe you.
If it wasn't, though, you'd better
check your own car any time it's

been standing untended in a public place. Now sit down and let me give you breakfast."

She accepted a loaded plate. She said, watching his face, "Right now Barney knows where I am and how long I should take. Barney doesn't believe in sharing the wealth. He can play rough when he gets upset."

"Like he did with Pete Wright?" Shayne said.

"That's not what you were supposed to say," she told him. "I gave you the truth when I said Barney didn't kill Pete. That's why he sent me here this morning—to convince you of it. And he did send me. There's a driver and another man waiting down in the car that brought me, if you want to look. They weren't my idea. Some time I'm coming alone, Mike."

Shayne choked down the response most natural to him under the circumstances.

"Does he expect you to do that?" he asked.

"He doesn't expect—" she began. "Oh, you mean how to make you believe he isn't the killer? First of all I'm authorized to equal the fee your other client promised. I suppose that was the Lobster Fishermen's Association?"

She paused, but Shayne kept his poker face.

"Well," she said, "don't tell me then. It doesn't change the offer. When you identify the killer with enough evidence to rate an arrest, Barney'll pay you five thousand dol-

lars on top of anything you get from anybody else. He really wants you to get the killer, Mike. He told me to help any way I could. I'm to leave with you all the way."

"How do I know?"

"You know because I tell you. She was getting angry.

"I mean how do I know whether you're telling the truth at any one time? I can't tell that with any woman. I mean any woman. All my life I've been trying to figure out how to know if a broad's lying—and still have to guess."

Now Betty was laughing openly.

"Guilty," she said. "We're a guilty. It's because we're afraid of you when it should be the other way round, so we lie to men. All of us do. You'll have to guess again. Come you can make your own check on what I tell you. When you find out proves out, then maybe you'll believe me. I hope so, because I'm going to be as honest as I can."

It was Shayne's turn to smile.

"Honey," he said, "you know I'd like to believe you. Confused as all that was, I'd like to believe it. So suppose you start by telling me all about where Barney fits into the picture. Why shouldn't he have had Pete killed?"

"For the best reason in the world," she said. "Barney didn't have to. He'd already bought Pete Wright. Don't forget the boat. He wasn't afraid of anybody who took his money, and he's too smart to just ask for a murder rap. Barney didn't

get where he is by being stupid or trigger-happy."

Shayne gave his left earlobe a contemplative tug. On the surface it sounded right, but there was a false note that eluded him.

"Where did Barney come in at all? What was he doing messing around with a Pete Wright?"

Betty Brill didn't even hesitate. "Barney's got imagination. He can see things ahead of his friends, specially when it comes to folding money. You know his union combine has already got the stevedores on the east coast. Barney got the idea of bringing in whole harbors—tugs, ferries, utility boats, yacht marinas, dock workers, fishermen—the works. In Miami the fishermen are lobstermen and vice versa. He could get them unionized. They'd be a starting point. He could move in on the other crowds he wanted. Also down here he had a fall guy to carry the ball for him while he stayed out of the picture."

Betty stopped to light a cigarette and drink some coffee. "Aren't you going to ask who the fall guy is?"

"I already know," Shayne said. "It has to be Nick Nicopolis of Southern Fish Shippers."

"My God," she said, "now I'll believe I'd better not lie to you. Old Nick thought he was playing his own hand while all the time he was pulling chestnuts out of the fire for Barney. He wanted to break the independent lobstermen. All the time he was vulnerable. Barney would

have moved right in on his new setup, and Nick's not big enough to stop him."

"This whole thing reads like Balkan politics," Shayne said, mopping egg with his last piece of toast.

"All politics is the same," Betty agreed. "Now you know when the pressure got serious the lobstermen formed their B.B.L.F.A. At first Barney figured that was okay. It's easier to deal with an organized outfit than with a bunch of individualists. He talked to their president, a guy named Delgado. The guy held out. Either he believed in his organization or he was trying to raise the price. Barney decided to hold off while Old Nick cut Mr. Delgado down to size. He approached Pete Wright, who was Leon's right bower. That's when I met Pete. First off he wouldn't deal either. Then he and I got to know each other pretty well."

"That changed things?" Shayne asked.

"Of course it did. I could point out to him he hadn't any chance at all unless he did things our way. Old Nick would cut his group for bait, and Barney'd come mop up what was left. A bunch of fishermen with mortgaged boats and no political heft were through before they started. Right now they could make a deal with Barney. They'd get a lot better terms by not causing him trouble. Pete saw the light, and Barney gave him the boat to make sure he stayed that way."

"If everything was all arranged," Shayne said, "why was Pete killed? Who wanted him dead? And isn't a fifty-G charter boat a lot to give a Pete Wright?"

"Sure it is, Mike." Betty answered his questions in reverse. "That is, it would be out of Barney's pocket. It came out of his union's slush fund. Also I think it was to buy Pete off seeing any more of me. If so, it was wasted money. Now, who killed Pete? We think maybe Old Nick found out what was going on and had his boy Duggan do the job.

"We haven't any proof, but it's logical. Pete selling to us bypassed Nick and gave Barney the Bay. It meant Nick had to play Barney's way or get no lobsters or fish on the market. But with Pete dead, Delgado'd go on fighting till Nick took him over. Nick would be strong enough then to pull the other fish houses into line. He could go to Barney as middleman for boatmen and wholesalers alike, and make a much better deal for himself."

One of Shayne's two phones in the apartment began to ring. It was the extension of his office phone. He picked it up.

The husky tones had to be those of Rose Delgado.

"Mike?" she said. "I've got to see you. Something awful. It's got to be right away." She named a large downtown department store. "Go to the sporting goods department. I'll try to contact you there."

"Okay," Shayne said. "Can't you give an idea?"

"I don't dare," she said. "Our phones could be bugged. I can't even use my name, but I think you know who this is."

The line went dead as she hung up. Shayne cradled his phone and turned back to Betty without explanation.

"You've left one big question out," he told her. "Why Barney sent you to sink the boat. No, let it be. You just tell Barney I already know the answer to that one."

"Then you don't believe me?"

"Don't put it that way, beautiful. I didn't say that. Fact is I believe almost all you said, and it helps. The trouble will be to figure out which parts not to believe."

"Mike, I honestly don't know about why Barney wanted it blown. I just did like he told me. I'll ask him if you—"

"Don't, Shayne said. "You just do like I say and tell him I'm sure I know the answer."

She wasn't satisfied, but she got up anyway and stood facing him as he stood near the phone. "Barney won't like it." She took a step forward. "He won't like this either."

She kissed him and all of a sudden their arms were about each other. Her lips were hot and fevered and her body raised a storm in his. Mike Shayne finally got himself free.

"This is a case," he said. "At

least I thought it was. I've got to keep it that way."

"The case will be over?"

"Of course it will, but if I want to be alive to see it, it will have to stay a case till then."

"I understand," Betty Brill said and turned to the door.

"Afterwards," Shayne said, "I couldn't care less what Barney likes."

She put up her hand and gave his earlobe a tug.

"Thanks, Mike," she said and smiled.

Betty had barely left the room when the second of the two phones rang. This was the unlisted number that only a few close friends had. Shayne recognized Will Gentry's voice with the first words.

"You wanted all I could get on a guy named Duggan?"

"I did," Shayne said. "Fingers are pointing at him from all directions as the Pete Wright killer. I want to know."

"There's only one thing you need to know about Duggan," the Police Chief said. "Your fingers are late. Duggan's on a slab in the sheriff's morgue right now. Couple of early bass fishing tourists found him in a lake in the swamp beyond Forty-Mile-Bend, and brought the body in about 7:30 this morning. There were three .38 slugs in him when he started his swim."

"Are you sure it's Duggan, Will?"

"Of course I'm sure. The trash fish had spoiled his face, but there were enough fingerprints left intact

for Burdick's boys to make a positive identification. The F.B.I. backed it up from their files. What does that do to your case?"

"It doesn't help it," Shayne admitted. "He was one prime suspect. Of course he could have killed Pete and been knocked off later to keep his mouth shut."

"He could," Gentry said. "Do you think that's the way it was?"

"I don't know, Will. I can't be sure."

"Well, I hate to keep handing you headaches, but there's something else you need to know. You're right about Pete not buying the *Bonnie Babe* in person. Selection, purchase and registration in Pete's name were all done by one of Barney Brill's lawyers."

"I knew it," Shayne said.

"Don't start cheering yet," Gentry said. "The boat was tied up at Dinner Key Marina for ten days and your buddy Pete was seen on board. More than once. The dockmen say he was there at night too—and a woman with him. She came and went bundled up so they can't identify. In fact one of them says he's sure there was more than one woman, but at different times. Again he can't prove it, but they can all swear to Pete being on board. So—how innocent do you still think he is?"

"It sounds bad," Shayne said. "I mean to find out, though."

"You do that," Gentry said. "And by the way, we've asked around town. Nobody's even heard rumors

of a contract being out on either Wright or Duggan. All the odds are some amateur did his own killing there."

"That's what you thought anyhow, wasn't it?" Shayne asked. "I had it figured that way."

"Yeah," Gentry said. "This whole killing is too complicated to be a pro job. A contract man uses a gun and goes away. He doesn't risk being caught carting a body out to some lake. Now—not to change the subject, of course—when are you going to tell me what you know? Like, for instance, what a certain woman who just came out of your place had to say?"

"She went to great lengths to tell me Barney Brill didn't do it," Shayne said. "How did you know about that?" There was a longstanding friendly agreement between the two that Shayne wouldn't be staked out or tailed by the Miami force.

"The regular prowl car man saw her come out of your building and get in a car with a couple of known hoods. He thought he'd better phone in. What else can you tell us?"

"Not a thing right now, Will. Maybe by tonight I'll have something more definite."

VI

MIKE SHAYNE hung up the phone, put his breakfast dishes into the kitchen sink, and went across town to his office. It was still early, and the store where he was to meet

Rose didn't open until ten o'clock. Lucy Hamilton wasn't due in till nine or later. He'd have time for a cigar and some concentrated thinking.

He pulled the blinds and drapes open and got the windows wide to let in the sunshine and a fresh breeze off the bay. Then he lit his cigar and put his feet up on the desk top. It was time to try and make sense out of what he knew and didn't know.

Mike Shayne had plenty to think about, as a matter of fact almost too much. One of his best suspects was dead. Of course that didn't mean Sam Duggan hadn't killed Pete Wright. He could have done it on order from some other person and been killed in turn to keep his mouth shut. Or one of the other lobster-men could have shot him in revenge for Pete. Only how would he have known who to shoot?

Barney Brill stood high on the list. It all depended on how much of Betty's story had been the truth and how much was lies to throw him off the right deductions. The evidence all appeared to prove that Barney had paid off Pete and would want him alive at least until he had the Bay in his grip. On the other hand Betty had kept claiming Pete as her lover. Certainly she was passionate and smart enough to seduce a healthy young man.

Barney wasn't the kind to accept horns, but neither was he one to put injured pride ahead of the dollar

sign. If he meant to have Pete killed over his wife, he'd at least wait till the lobster war was over and settled his way.

Could Betty herself have set up the killing to silence Pete or out of jealousy of his wife or of Rose Delgado? Again it seemed unlikely. Betty would work with, not against her husband in his financial and political affairs. Unless she'd always done so, she wouldn't still be his wife.

On the whole Shayne felt that Betty hadn't done the killing herself and was honestly convinced that Barney had nothing to do with it either. Her voice had been full of conviction when she defended her husband.

How about Rose Delgado herself then? Again Shayne couldn't make up his mind. The dark woman had two possible motives. One would be if she felt herself losing Pete to a younger and more glamorous lover such as Betty Brill. The other could have been simple loyalty to the lobstermen and a mounting rage if she thought that Pete was selling out to Barney Brill. Once more a difficulty was the manner of the killing. Shayne could hardly see Rose Delgado using a fast speedboat and a clumsy, heavy shafted fish spear.

Her husband Leon and even Old Nick Nicopolis had to be included in the list as possibles but Shayne didn't have a really first class motive strong enough to make either one



risk detection and arrest on a murder rap.

One thing was sure. Pete had left behind something of prime importance to the killer. Whoever killed him on his boat must have expected him to have it on his person and been furious, then desperate when it wasn't to be found.

Shayne was almost certain he had what was wanted in the little black notebook he'd discovered taped to the underside of the desk in the Wright home. He got it out of his office safe and looked it over again.

It wasn't any good to him. There were initials, figures, what might have been dates, and possible abbreviations for barrels or pounds. The capital letters BB appeared more

than once. They could stand for Betty Brill, Barney Brill, *Bonnie Babe*—or for that matter Boston Beans. There was no way at all to tell.

Shayne was almost sure Pete hadn't used a code. He wasn't the sort of person who'd know about codes or have access to them anyway. If he ever did think of one it would be the simplest sort, like numbering the letters of the alphabet, or transposing them. Shayne had already checked the book and found no evidence of anything of the sort.

No, Pete unconsciously had done the one thing that would hide his secret better than any code yet known to man. He'd used his own "personal shorthand" of abbreviations and partial entries. After all he knew what each figure represented when he wrote it down. He had no need to identify it in writing. He could use true initials or put in phonies to confuse a reader. Only a half dozen figures in the whole scrawl might have any real meaning.

Nobody could translate this sort of thing. He'd have to think like the writer, know exactly what had been in his mind when he made each entry. In other words he'd have to be Pete Wright himself.

The killer didn't know it yet, but he was perfectly safe. He could have mailed the book to the F.B.I. itself with no fear of its being translated. The insurance policy he thought Pete had left behind was really nothing

of the sort. It was only a senseless scribble.

It was still valuable to Shayne though—as long, and only as long, as the real killer didn't know how worthless it really was.

It gave the redhead that invaluable edge with which he could make the killer come out of hiding and expose himself to attack. Years of experience made Shayne value that edge. Whenever he had it, he'd manage to break the case he worked on.

On the other hand it was plain to him that more than one party knew about the notebook and were after it. He believed Betty Brill when she said she hadn't put the bomb in his car. That meant somebody else had. Somebody had tailed him to and from Flamingo and tried to kill him.

Somebody had scouted Pete's home and then searched it after his death. Shayne had only gotten a glance at the two men when he was blackjacked. He couldn't pick either one out of a lineup, but he had seen enough to know they weren't professional hoods. For one thing both wore faded khaki pants, old sports shirts and sandals. They could have been fishermen, small time burglars or a couple of Old Nick's phony poachers. It wasn't likely Barney Brill would use cheap punks to carry out the garbage.

He still didn't believe Betty Brill hadn't known why the *Babe* was bombed. He hunted for a motive Brill might have had for doing that.

Far from hiding his connection with the charter boat and Pete Wright, the sinking would just draw attention to it so the whole matter was bound to come out. Brill had to be willing for that to happen only because he was trying to cover up something a lot more dangerous to himself.

Somebody had been enough afraid of Sam Duggan to kill him and take his body into the swamp. Shayne agreed with Gentry that it didn't have the feel of a pro job.

Somewhere there had to be a fact that would tie the whole mess of jigsaw puzzle items together and make a clear picture. He knew that, but he couldn't seem to isolate it. His brow furrowed.

When Lucy Hamilton came in she fixed him more strong coffee. It didn't do any good. No matter how he tried, the pieces just didn't fit together.

There was one nagging item that kept on bothering him. He couldn't quite accept it as truth, and somehow that colored his appraisal of all the other facts.

"I've got to check it out," he said aloud.

"Check what, Mike?" Lucy asked.

"I don't care what those two oversexed women say," Shayne told her. "Pete Wright was never the lover type. He wouldn't be having affairs with both of them at the same time. I don't believe he'd double deal his wife either. A lot of men wouldn't and I know Pete was one of them.

So why would they try to tell me he did? I don't think he'd sell out the lobstermen either. It just doesn't fit. So why does everybody take so much trouble to prove he did?"

"If you're right, and I think you are," Lucy said, "I can think of one good reason to frame anything on him. He's dead and can't defend himself."

Shayne swung his feet off the window seat to hit the floor with a solid thump.

"Lucy," he said. "You're even smarter than you are pretty. Why didn't I see it? Right there in front of my nose all the time, and I missed it."

"I just assumed you'd thought of it," Lucy said.

"Don't ever just assume anything again. I think you just solved a case for me. I'm going out now and prove it."

VII

MIKE SHAYNE looked at his watch and found it was almost ten o'clock. His first stop was the parking lot of the department store Rose Delgado had named. He locked his car carefully after parking close to the information booth, where anyone trying to disturb it would be seen. Then he gave the lot attendant five dollars to watch it for him.

He was one of the first through the doors when the store opened, and found the ground floor sporting goods section easily enough. He turned his back to the aisle, and

pretended to examine a selection of golf clubs. Even the conservative Palm Beach suit and white shirt he'd changed to wouldn't hide him from Rose. The red hair and the width of his shoulders would spot him for her.

Rose Delgado wasn't more than ten minutes behind him. She stood beside him looking at the golf clubs for a minute.

"Follow me," she said, very low, and went quickly to the back of the department.

There was a service door hidden behind standing racks of water skis and fishing rods. He followed her through and found himself on a stairway for employee use. Rose was already going rapidly down the steps.

The stairway ended in a large storage basement filled with bales, crates and boxes in orderly rows. Rose led him quickly down one of the aisles until they were sheltered from the view of anyone using the stairs.

"Mike," she said, "I'm so glad you came."

"That's good," Shayne said. "What's troubling you so much?"

"Sam Duggan," she said. "He's dead—killed. Leon heard it on police band radio before dawn and told me. Mike—I was sure he was the one who'd killed Pete. I thought Pete had been selling information to Sam's boss and either got too greedy or grew a conscience and was going to blow the whistle, and

that got him killed. I knew he'd been on the *Bonnie Babe*, and I thought he might have left something there that would point you to the killer. He'd had that woman there too. You must know who she is by now."

Shayne looked at her. Her face was strained and her eyes haunted. He didn't think she'd had much sleep.

"You're a poor liar, Rose," he said. "You shouldn't try it with an expert like me. You were never Pete's lover. I guess you wanted to be, but that's all. And when Duggan was killed what really upset you was you were afraid you'd be next. You still are, aren't you?"

She masked her eyes and came a step closer.

"Yes," she said in a low and broken voice, "I still am. I think she and her husband had both of them killed. I think she means to kill me. You've got to help me, Mike."

Shayne let that go by.

"The only thing could help you now is to talk," he said. "Tell me the truth if you want help. For instance, what did you expect me to find when I searched the *Bonnie Babe*? Start with that, why don't you?"

She looked up. There were tears in her eyes. "Mike, you must believe me. I'm not lying. I'm afraid. I just wanted you to get interested enough to investigate the *Babe*. Then you'd find out it was in Pete's

name. Boat registrations are public records. I could find that much out, but it'd take somebody like you to find the real killer."

Shayne felt indefinable feather fingers on his spine. Some instinct was alerting him to impending danger. A man who often deals with death develops a private radar of his own. He set himself for quick action.

Aloud, he said: "No, Rose. You could have told me all that. You meant me to search the boat and find something Pete had left there. Call it his insurance policy if you like. Don't deny it, because I found it. Not on the boat, but I have it anyway."

He saw her eyes widen and her hands come up to touch his shoulders at the same time that there was a whisper of sound on the concrete floor behind him.

Shayne spun on his heel with amazing speed for a man his size. The man was coming in too fast for him to block. The redhead went sideways and down on his knees so that the vicious six-inch knife sliced the air where his stomach had been a split second before.

As the man's own rush brought him on, Shayne got both big hands on the bare right ankle and heaved upward. He came erect, for a second holding the knifer high in the air over his head. The man twisted and tried to cut downward with the knife. It just threw him off whatever balance he might have had, and

when Shayne let go he fell onto the floor with enough force to break his neck.

Shayne looked down at the man. He was still alive, but badly smashed up. If the neck was broken he'd be paralyzed. He was swarthy, with oiled black hair. He wore a store workman's coveralls and had taken off shoes and socks to be quieter and more sure footed. The knife was a cheap hunting blade available in any hardware store.

Rose was huddled back against the wall of cartons and weeping.

"Oh, Mike," she sobbed, "for a minute I thought—" She broke down.

"For a minute," Shayne said, "you thought your boy here had got me just as you planned. You must have known him when you worked here. You had to or you wouldn't have known about this place. Right? You signaled him in when I said I had Pete's "insurance". Well, honey, I've still got it—and I'm going to keep it till I pass it on to the police."

She shrank back and looked at him fearfully.

"No," he said, "I'm not going to kill you. Just don't try it again. Now get out of here fast. I'll call the police to come and pick up Killer off the floor."

Shayne called Gentry as soon as he could get to a pay phone.

"We'll pick him up right away. Everything legal will be done to get him to talk," the Chief said.

"Don't worry if he doesn't" Shayne said. "I think now I can fill in the missing words myself." Then he hung up without saying where he'd called from.

His next stop was the Pete Wright apartment. The officer guarding Molly recognized him and let him in. Shayne took her to the kitchen, where they could talk privately.

He got right to the point. "Molly, I want you to think carefully before you answer this. Did Pete ever go out with other women—even one woman—since you were married? You can tell me the truth. You know I'm a friend of both of you. It could help me find the one who killed him."

She looked shocked. "Oh no, Mr. Shayne. Pete never—We were real lovers and never looked at anybody else. We were close. I think I'd have known if he'd even wanted another woman. Why—why do you ask? Do you know something?"

Shayne looked straight into her eyes. "I don't know a thing, Molly. You can stop worrying. The only reason I asked was I wanted to hear it direct from you. Now one thing more. Does a boat called the *Bonnie Babe* mean anything to you?"

"Yes. Sure it does." She didn't hesitate at all. "Pete's been taking care of her for the owner. She's tied up down at Dinner Key. Pete took me on her lots of times."

"Took you on her?" Shayne tried to make his tone casual. That wasn't

the way he felt at all. "How'd he come to take you—and when was the last time?"

"About a week ago. He was going to do some work on her and he needed to look her over first. Other times he went to talk business with a red-haired woman we met there. Maybe she was the owner. Anyway he'd talk to her in the wheelhouse while I stayed in the cabin. Tell the truth I think he wanted me there so she wouldn't think he'd get any wrong ideas about her."

Shayne put back his head and laughed at the way Betty must have felt with Molly sitting in the cabin. He wished he could have watched it just once.

"Was there ever a dark woman there?" he asked Molly.

"No, never," she said. "Most of the times there was just us, and sometimes the redhead woman. He called her Miss Betty, if that'll help you at all."

"I already know who she is."

"Mr. Shayne, was she—I mean—when you asked me just now. I mean about Pete. You know—"

"Was she his girl friend? Absolutely no. Did Pete ever tell you who did own the boat?"

"He never did. I don't think he knew himself at first. Later on when he did I think it upset him, so I didn't ask. A wife shouldn't press her man."

"The world would be a better place if more wives knew that." Shayne took out his wallet. He'd

put the little black book in the compartment where he kept his own address book. There'd be no reason for anyone seeing it to suspect it wasn't his. Now he passed it to Molly. "Ever see that before? Go on, open it."

"No, I never. It looks like Pete's hand, but he never showed it to me." She gave it back to Mike.

"Molly," he said, "you've been a big help. Now I think I'm really getting somewhere!"

From the Wright home he drove downtown to the river bank, where the docks, freezing and packing plants and offices of Southern Fish Shippers were located. Nicopolis was back of his desk, wearing a blue linen shirt and an Italian silk suit that must have cost three or four times as much as Mike spent on his clothes. Shayne didn't like the cut or the color.

"What do you want, shamus?" Nicopolis said uncivilly.

"I see you're your usual delightful self today," Shayne said without bothering to sit down. "I suppose the cops have been in about Sam?"

"What's that to you, cop lover?"

"Nothing really, Nick. I just stopped by to tell you whoever shot him wasted his time. I've got what all of you were looking for."

"I don't even know what you're talkin' about."

"Sure you do, Nick. Sure you do. Question is—how much do you still want it?"



"I dunno nothing about it."

"Well," Shayne said, "I'm a reasonable man. I don't argue with money. If you want to make a cash offer, I'll be in my office tonight."

Nicopolis said nothing. Shayne watched him for a minute and then got up and left the office.

He drove to a downtown parking lot and from there walked over to the DuPont building, where one of Barney Brill's attorneys had his suite of offices. When the blonde receptionist called in his name, the lawyer came out at once.

"Mr. Shayne? I'm Joe Rigby. Believe me I'm glad you came by. There's a client in my office right now, but I won't keep you waiting. If you like we can use the desk of one of my associates." He led Mike Shayne down the hall to a beautifully appointed office.

"This won't take long," Shayne

said, and sat down in one of the comfortable, leather lounge chairs. "You're close enough to Barney Brill to have his ear."

"He listens to me, if that's what you mean. Nobody influences him very far."

"Listens is what I meant," Shayne said. "This is a wonderful chair Mr. Rigby. Sometime you'll have to tell me where you got it. But to get to business, I want you to tell Barney I know what he's been looking for. In fact I've got it. Now I'm not a difficult man to deal with and I've no special reason to use what I have. If he'd like to give me some nice reasons not to, I'll be in my office this evening and ready to listen."

The lawyer was no fool. "Suppose I get Mr. Brill on the phone right now. Perhaps—"

"No," Shayne cut him off. "You'll understand the competitive bids aren't all in yet. You understand. I'll see him tonight, or anyone talking for him who has adequate credentials." He got up to go. "It's been nice meeting you, Mr. Rigby."

Rigby shook hands. "Indeed, yes. I hope you'll let me send you one of these chairs as a gift, Mr. Shayne."

"No strings on it?"

"None. Someday I might want to hire you to do some work for me. Strictly in the line of business."

Mike Shayne went down to the lobby and found a phone booth. He called Lucy Hamilton at his office and gave her long and detailed in-

structions. The rest of the afternoon was spent in the cool darkness of a Flagler Street movie theatre watching a double bill of horror flicks. After half an hour he went to sleep.

Shayne had a thick, rare steak at one of his favorite restaurants on Biscayne Boulevard. He took a table in the middle of the floor, where anyone looking in could spot him at once. Afterwards he drove back to his office and let himself in with his own key.

The first thing Shayne did was put on the office lights. Then he closed the heavy drapes and venetian blinds so no one could see in from the street. Only after that did he open the door from the front office space to the kitchen of the converted rear office.

As Shayne had planned, Will Gentry and his confidential aide Lieutenant Maine were there. So was Tim Rourk, looking more cadaverous than ever. So was Lucy Hamilton, whom he'd specifically told to stay away. The intercom system which went to every room was set so they could hear a match scratch in the office.

The four of them had the windows sealed against light escape. They sat around a table with a fifteen watt bulb in the small lamp, playing desultory poker. Rourk was working his way down a bottle of Scotch. Shayne glared at Lucy, nodded to the others, said: "Somebody should be along any time now,

boys," and went back in front after closing the door.

The intercom was a refinement made on Shayne's special order. It was on when the switch read off, and vice versa. He'd often found it useful.

Shayne hadn't long to wait. He got through barely half a game of solitaire with his dog-eared card deck before he heard the elevator door into the central hallway open and close as someone came in. The visitor tried the door to the office, found it unlocked, and came on in without bothering to knock. He had a heavy, blued steel .44 magnum revolver in his right hand.

With his left he reached behind him and shot the bolt on the inside of the door. Moving swiftly, he crossed the floor and turned the key in the inner room lock. It had been left on the office side of the door. Mike cursed himself for a careless fool and hoped the others had heard the lock turn and guessed what had happened. If not, his reserves were effectively cut off.

The black bore of the big gun kept centered on Shayne's head. From where he sat it looked as big as a ten gauge goose gun. The man behind it circled warily till he could see that the intercom dial pointed to *off*. He stayed on his feet and didn't come near the desk.

He was as tall as the big redhead, but not as broad in the shoulder—few men were. His hair and eyes were black and his skin olive. He

wore sixty dollar shoes and a three hundred dollar Italian silk suit and no necktie. The clothes were new and he wore them awkwardly. Black dirt was caked under the fingernails of the hand holding the gun. It didn't keep the hand from being steady.

"Where is it?" he fairly hissed at Shayne.

"Where's what?" Shayne said at the intercom without raising his voice. "Don't you ever knock or identify yourself?"

"I don't like games." The man had a slight accent. "You tell all, over town you got Pete's notes. Give me—right now. I got nothing to lose if I kill you."

"That's right, Delgado," Shayne said evenly. "You've already killed twice and they only hang you once."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, come off it, Leon," Shayne said. "You're going to kill me anyhow, so why not talk? Why should I give you anything at all? It won't help me."

The dark man said: "Sure I'm going to kill you. You think I'm crazy or somepin? You give me the notes and you get shot once in the head. Die easy. Make me hunt it and I gut-shoot you. Then I go gut-shoot that office girl you think so much of. I know where she lives. So make up your mind."

Shayne kept his voice as calm as possible. "You're my man all right, Leon. It wasn't Pete sold out the B.B.L.F.A. It was you, and you

made the mistake of selling to both Nicopolis and Barney Brill. That left you in the middle no matter what happened, didn't it?"

"You having fun?" Delgado snarled. "I better shoot you now."

"You better let me talk," Shayne said, "if you want me to give you the notes. You might not find them by yourself." He waited, but Delgado made no comment.

"Okay," Shayne continued, "Pete began to get suspicious. Before long he'd find out it was you he was looking for. You had Brill put the *Babe* in his name, figuring to frame him in your place. It might have worked, particularly with Rose ready to swear they were lovers. Pete was too fast for you, though. The night he was killed he talked to you on the dock before you both went out to the traps. He was probably fool enough to both threaten you and give you a chance to change your mind.

"He told you he'd written down his evidence, figuring that would hold you, but he didn't figure on your temper. When he stepped into his boat you followed him in yours. Out in the bay you hailed him to wait for you and put the spear in his back when he did. You took his wallet and searched the boat but didn't find what you wanted."

"You sound like you were there," Leon said. The even, un-excited tone of Shayne's voice had lowered his guard but not his gun. "You lying of course."

"No," Shayne said. "I'm telling it like it is, the only way it could be. You had Pete's place searched, but I ran your boys off and found the notes myself. You sent Rose to plant ideas with me. Barney Brill sent his wife to bomb the boat if she couldn't find the notes you said tied him to the killing. You watched that from the crowd, then tailed me out and planted the bomb in my car when I stopped.

"By that time Sam Duggan was figuring out the truth. He tried to blackmail you, and you put him in the swamp. You had Rose and your man bushwack me in the store basement. Then you heard I had what you wanted and came to get it for yourself. I'm right, aren't I?"

"Great detective," Leon said. "Biggest detective outside of books. Now give me Pete's writing."

Shayne had figured what he had to try. The others couldn't come to his help in time with the door locked. This time Delgado, with his gun already out, had the edge. Shayne still had to try.

He put both hands flat on the desk blotter and pulled himself erect.

"You win," he said. "I'm going to pull the center desk drawer open, but not put my hand in so you can't think I'm trying anything. Then I'll step back. You'll see a little black book on some papers in the drawer. That's what you want. Check it for yourself."

When Shayne stepped back Del-

gado came behind the desk. He kept his eyes on the detective till the last possible moment, then let them flick to the drawer.

As Delgado looked into the drawer Shayne let himself go down on his knees and his right hand streaked for his belt-holstered gun. Leon caught a flash of movement and pulled the trigger, but he was trying to find a black book where it wasn't and it slowed him down. His shot went where Shayne's head had been before he dropped. The big gun roared like a cannon in the closed room and the kick nearly broke his wrist. His second round went into the ceiling.

Shayne could just about take his own time. He shot Delgado through the right shoulder so the gun fell out of his hand just as Gentry and Maine hit the closed door together. They were both big men and the lock broke at once.

They got the cuffs on Delgado in short order.

"Get the brandy," Shayne told Lucy. "I think we can use a drink." He took the black book out and gave it to Gentry.

"Hey," the Chief said, "how do I read this?"

"You'll have to figure that out for yourself," Shayne said. "I never did."

"Then what pointed you to this bum?" Rourke indicated the furious but helpless Leon.

"I'm a detective," Shayne said. "I try to think like one. Besides I believed in Pete Wright. I told you all he couldn't have sold out. Lucy told me why he'd been framed. Why should Barney buy the number two man of the lobsterman? He'd make number one whatever offer it took to get him. Why leave a clear trail, except to a red herring? Then Delgado could have done all the things that bothered us. Nobody else could. This morning though his Rose hung him for fair."

"How was that, Mike?"

"She said Leon told her Sam Duggan was dead when she woke up. Said he got it off police radio before dawn. He couldn't have. The sheriff's boys didn't have the body, let alone an identification, till well after daylight."

"What happens to the lobster war now?" Lucy Hamilton asked.

"It's over for a while," Will Gentry said. "After this mess neither Old Nick nor Barney will want to bother them. Not with us watching. The phony poachers will go and they can handle casual sneak thieves like they've always done."

"Amen," Mike Shayne said, as he reached for the brandy bottle.

The ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every month.

LITTLE MAN WITH BIG MOUTH



He was trapped, doomed. He couldn't stay alive another day. No? That's where I came in . . .

by EDWARD Y. BREESE

THE NOTE SAID: "Come and get me." It quoted the name of an old and valued friend.

Still more to the point, it contained a perfectly negotiable cashier's check on a Swiss bank made out in my name. The amount was ten thousand dollars.

I'm Johnny Hawk, and I can't resist a challenge. When the challenge comes complete with a first installment in five figures I don't even try to resist.

I memorized the instruction sheet before burning it in an ash tray. I packed a single bag with clothing and the more necessary lethal tools of my trade of mercenary trouble shooter. I cashed the check, taking large amounts of more than one national currency, and snuggling all down in a money belt. Then I indulged in a last American meal of two-inch-thick steak and fried onions topped off by a snifter of old and mellow brandy.

Featuring

JOHNNY HAWK



The first item on the expense account was a first class airline ticket to the north coast of Jamaica. I flew with a covey of plump and ponderous tourists, thinly salted with petulant Levantine money brokers and their too beautiful female companions. The seat was comfortable and the sea was blue under our wings.

The resort hotels were faithfully copied from Miami Beach. So were the outstretched palms of the service personnel. Judicious crossing of a few of those palms got me the name of the local joker I needed to see.

The front man was three hundred and forty pounds of shiny black patent leather. On his big-boned six-foot-six it didn't really show as fat. He wore a white silk suit, lavender shirt, diamond belt buckle and real alligator shoes, size thirteen and a half. He spoke excellent Limehouse cockney with a slight West African accent.

His boss, in whose presence he took off his \$100, handwoven Panama hat and spoke softly, was five-foot-three and about one hundred and ten pounds of highly concentrated menace. He had the eyes of a cobra and the toothy look of a peevish Norway rat. His name was Horace, and the big man was deathly afraid of him.

I wasn't—and Horace apparently recognized the fact right off the bat. We sat in split-cane chairs on the unpainted porch of a shack on a high hill back of the gaudy tourist complex, and exchanged the formal

amenities of our trade. I really think both of us enjoyed every minute of it.

After a decent interval the big man mixed us a punch of excellent rum and fresh fruits and took himself off out of earshot, so we could get down to business.

The arrangements didn't take long.

Horace both knew his business and was willing to charge a reasonable price. Before dawn the next morning I was leaving the port as passenger of an ancient and battered Bahama sloop with patched sails and a festoon of deepwater fishing nets.

The sloop was paintless and her rigging was slack. The captain wore gold rings through his ears in the manner of his piratical great-grandfather. There were blood-sucking bugs in the bunks and lice in the cracks of the decking. In the hold, where it didn't show at all, was about four thousand dollars worth of beautifully tuned diesel enginery.

Old as she was, I'd bet that sloop could show her heels to anything less than a new navy destroyer. Horace hadn't said, but I figured he used her to carry diamonds, dope and other highly lucrative contraband.

The bunk was unthinkable, and the heavy belt knives the crew wore were a deterrent to dozing off in any case. I leaned on the rail and let the captain boast to me about his exploits with the women of a dozen

island ports. If you wanted to believe him, he'd had an interesting, if highly unusual life. When the details got a bit too pungent even for my taste I tried to get him talking about his trade.

He was willing enough as long as I didn't probe for names and dates, and I knew how to read between the lines. In a couple of hours I'd picked up information that would have earned a promotion for a revenue officer in any one of a dozen services.

Only one part of it really interested me.

"They submarines," he said. "Gets to be more of them, all will be spoiled for honest men like us."

I took him up. "What submarines?"

"I doesn't truly know, sah. They comes up and goes down all the time now. I've seen they hove to, off the out-islands and behin' the reefs. They markings aren't English or any writing I know."

With the toe of my shoe I traced my best impression of a Chinese ideogram in the heavy dew settled on the deck. They showed up well enough in the thin moonlight.

"That's right, sah."

"Which one is right?" I asked.

"Why both, sah, both. Some is like one—and then the other."

I let it go at that. The implications didn't please me any more than the subs themselves did the captain. More than the future of smuggling could be at stake in these waters.

The captain really hustled the old girl along. Still it was a good three days before we sighted Cape Falso and slipped in behind Isle Beata. If Horace hadn't warned me to bring tinned food and bottled drinks I might have starved. Maybe, only maybe, I could have lived on the hard bread and boiled salt cod the crew ate twice a day. The only times I slept were a few hours in a chair with the cabin door bolted and the port screwed shut. I couldn't stay awake all the time.

Friends of the crew came out from the Dominican coast in a whaleboat to take me ashore. They spoke a sort of bastard Spanish, quite different from what I'd learned in Cuba and Mexico. We could only communicate at all with difficulty. The big Colt's .45 holstered at my belt spoke loudly for me.

Horace's shore contact here turned out to be the local schoolmaster. He was harried, tubercular, venal, yet curiously dedicated to pounding some measure of literacy into his near-naked pupils.

I paid over the equivalent of six month's salary in Jamaican pounds to him. In return I got a sore-backed mule and a barefoot, teenaged son of the soil for guide into the hills.

Once in the hills I gave the boy a brand new Case knife with three blades that I'd brought along for just that purpose. It made him my devoted slave. Money wouldn't have impressed him at all.

He got me over the border into the black republic easily enough, and without encountering the armed patrols of either government. He put me on the trail to the village I'd been told to find, and made sure the mule's nose was pointed in the right direction. By this time we were regular friends and the leavetaking was heavy with formal Spanish phrases. I don't really know what he said, but I'm sure that it was well meant.

Just before dark a black man in ragged canvas pants and carrying a well-honed machette materialized out of the brush in front of me and blocked the trail. We took stock of each other.

"M'Soo Hock?" he tried.

I just nodded.

"Me speak American, I," he said. "My fadder he work for Marines when I boy. Me debbil-dog junior. That is I, Joseph."

Actually what he turned out to speak was a sort of pigeon-English, slightly tainted with Brooklynese and heavily interlarded with his native African-French-Creole. I do my best to convey at least the general sense of his words.

"Me take you Doc Nik," he said next and led off up the trail. My mule followed quite happily.

The way was corkscrew twisty, almost straight up and down the mountain at times. We were in thick mountain-growth jungle so I could never see more than a few feet in any direction. It was like riding through an endless tunnel.

All of a sudden Joseph stopped. The look of him screamed "Danger" louder than an air-raid siren could have done. He was silent and still as stone. Even the sweat on his brown shoulders seemed to stop beading and hold still. His nostrils flared as he sniffed the air from around the next bend. Then he was gone.

It was so fast I couldn't remember if he'd stepped right or left off the path.

The jungle swallowed him utterly. He had never existed.

I went for my gun.

Joseph's place on the path was filled by two brown men. One was in khaki shirt and pants and carried a shotgun. The other wore a dirty white suit, sandals, and a Czech-made machine pistol with skeleton stock. Shotgun was in front so I'd have to take him first, which I didn't like.

We were three pros all together. Nobody wasted breath yelling "Hands up!" or any such nonsense. We fired together.

Because I'd sensed what was coming, I was a bare shade faster than they were. Shotgun was still swinging to cover me when my heavy, 300 gr. special handload took him in the chest. He fired by reflex, barely missing the mule.

The smashing shock of the .45 slammed him off his feet and back against his friend. The first burst from the squirt gun shredded some jungle growth. The gunner caught

his friend with his left arm and embraced him for a shield. I shot at his head. The bullet went through his open mouth at an angle and came out through the right cheek. As good as a miss.

The muzzle of the machine pistol was swinging on me. When he pulled trigger I'd be dead. I tried to get off another shot to make it a Mexican stand-off, one for one.

Joseph came out of the jungle a step behind the gunner. His machette came down, swung full armed, and chopped into the skull like cutting a melon.

That was when the mule woke up to what was going on. He turned in his own length, tossed me into a tangle of brush, and started home at a pace that established the new all-time record for mountain mules.

I crawled out of the brush. Joseph grinned at me.

"Marine type fight," he said proudly. He kicked the man he'd killed. "Pig," he said and spat on the body.

I tried to brush myself off and reloaded my gun.

"Nice work," I said. "Who were they anyway?"

"Tonton," he said. That was the local dictator's private army. It told me in one word that there was going to be a rough time ahead.

Joseph stripped the white jacket off the dead gunner and put it on. His shoulders split a couple of seams, and the still-wet blood gave him a piebald look. Neither item

seemed to bother him at all. He stripped both bodies and rolled everything up in a bundle to carry. Then he threw the bodies off the trail.

He took the shotgun and shells for himself. After puzzling over the squirt-gun awhile and deciding he didn't understand its operation, he handed that to me. There was only one spare drum of cartridges.

There wasn't any chance of catching the mule, but we backtracked far enough to find where he'd scraped my duffel bag off against the trunk of a tree. That was all I really wanted.

This took time. It was full dark an hour before we came to the village. I stayed close behind Joseph and let him lead me blindly. Sometimes I followed by the smell of him alone. He was quiet as a cruising owl, but the sweat and blood marked his position well enough.

THE VILLAGE WAS bedded down for the night — no TV out here. There were a dozen thatch-roofed huts in a clearing off the trail. Open fires smoldéred in front of most of them to give some light, and a couple of duplicates of Joseph were sitting up for us. I guess they knew his smell. Nothing was said when we walked in.

Joseph went into the largest hut. There was noise of someone floundering about and a quick spate of talk. Then the light of a kerosene lantern flared inside, and Joseph

carried it out to where I stood. A white man came with him.

"So you got here," he said to me. "It's still true — *Advertis etinim frangi non esse virorum*. You'll get me out of here after all."

He had a voice that was at once preposterous and overwhelming. It was the clear bell tone of a champion mountain-bred foxhound. Even held low it bugled at me. When he got mad the volume could crack window panes. It was the biggest thing about him, and of course he knew it.

The rest was five foot four and so thin as to be mostly bones, topped by the bearded face of an aged satyr. Hair and beard were snow white and the eyes such a pale grey as to appear almost without pupils at night. It was that incredible voice that commanded respect.

"I sir, am," He rattled off a dozen clicking syllables. "They call me, for short, Dr. Nikko. To you, Mr. Hawk, let it be plain Barni Nikko."

"I'm Johnny Hawk."

"Of course you are, my boy. Of course you are. Good of you to come. But of course our mutual friend said that you would. Your *belle dame du temps jadis*."

"I trust Ann Panama," I said. "She vouched for you. So did the check. Now suppose you tell me the rest of-it."

"*Auribus teneo lupum*, my boy," he said. "I can't kill the beast without some help. You were vouched for as the best that could be bought."

"Lupus means wolf," I said. "Why don't you try speaking English?"

He had the grace to laugh. "Quotation is a bad habit of mine, Mr. Hawk. The curse of the classical education. I'll try to modify it for your sake."

"*Arche hemisy pantos*," I remembered from college.

For the first time he looked at me with real respect. "I've underestimated you, Mr. Hawk. I won't do that again."

"Call me Johnny," I said, "and let's get down to cases."

We squatted on our heels by one of the dying fires while he filled me in.

"I'm a bad man," he said. "I've lived a bad life." Originally a Finn, he'd been brought up all over Europe by a restless beauty of a mother. Degrees from Oxford and the Sorbonne. The Finnish army in WW2, then the English. After the war he went to West Berlin, where he bought and sold tangibles and intangibles to both cold-war sides. A double agent.

"In the end," he said, "I had no friends at all. I had only money. That's no use in Russia or China these days, so I opted to come to America. Your people wouldn't believe me but the others did. They have me marked to kill. I know too much, and besides they want my money — if they can find it."

He'd been afraid to try any of the usual routes to the U. S. for

fear he'd be spotted and killed. In Switzerland he'd known Ann Panama, and she'd told him if anyone could help, it would be Johnny Hawk. He'd gotten some cashier checks with only the name blank and in units of 5 and 10 thousand dollars and taken a plane to Trinidad. From there the same network of which Horace was a part had smuggled him into Dominica. After that he took a coaster to Aux Cayes. It was there that two Chinese jumped him in an alley. He knew the other side had caught up with him.

He left me to guess what had happened to the Chinese. Nikko himself had gotten away with Joseph's help. "Among many things I know a little medicine. I helped his sick mother. He brought me here. Until you were attacked today I thought this place would be safe."

"Why didn't you go out the way I came in?" I said.

"I couldn't. I have to get to Jacmel first, before I go to the States. Besides the people who helped you come in would have sold me out cheap. I used that route to get a letter out. That is probably why you were ambushed. Somebody read the letter or put two and two together when you showed up."

From the minute he's started to run, he'd felt he could not trust anyone. "*A muertos y a idos, pocos amigos.* To my old friends I am already dead. They have agents all



through this country. Weren't you attacked?"

His manner was intense, feverish. I was tired and annoyed.

"Let's get some sleep," I said. "In the morning we go to Jacmel." I could see there were things he wasn't going to tell me, and I needed to think through a plan of action. I was tired of trying to puzzle out his quotations."

"You make it sound easy," he said.

"This is a quote from Johnny Hawk," I told him. "Put it in your file. Everything is easy to the man who knows what he wants."

I rolled up in a blanket by the fire. In the morning Joseph boiled salt cod and rice in an old gasoline tin for breakfast. I ate it — figuring I'd need the strength later on. Right after breakfast a friend of Joseph's came in with the word that

a patrol of Tontons was working its way up from the coast.

We took off at once. So did everybody else. If the patrol ever got there, they'd find only deserted huts. They could go on and look for the two we'd killed, if soldier ants or other vermin hadn't already stripped the bones.

By daylight Nikko was no more attractive than by dark. With those pale eyes and nervous ways he reminded me of an alley tom-cat getting ready to raid the garbage cans. He slunk in the jungle. Joseph and I both walked.

I didn't underrate him though. If this one wasn't dangerous he'd never have lived to grow white hair. When sweat plastered the clothes to him I could see that he had a flate automatic under his left arm, a money belt, and what probably was a stiletto strapped to the calf under his right pants leg.

Nobody said much all day. We just followed Joseph up and down ridges, through cane-brakes and along trails I couldn't really see at all. My eyes and my compass told me we were moving roughly West and South along the wildest spine of the coastal range. Not even an army could have found or tracked us in there.

Just before dark Joseph found us some overripe mangos for supper. I rescued the meal by contributing a couple of cans of corned beef out of my pack.

"We go in tomorrow after dark," Nikko said when we finished.

"Why go in at all?" I asked.

"Because I'm paying you another ten thousand dollars when we get to the States."

This was the first time he'd named a definite figure.

"You," I said, "can pay it to the devil and be damned to you. I go no farther with a blindfold on my mind unless I go alone."

His face and eyes reminded me of a ferret in the dusk.

"Twenty thousand?" he said.

"Twenty-five," I told him. "But even for fifty, I'd go no farther without some information. You want me to get you through, but I can't unless I know what the odds are going to be."

The minutes dragged while he thought it over and full dark came down. I wished I could watch his face, but it was all I could do to make out where he sat. At last he spoke in that curious, resonant voice.

"You have a right to know. We must pick up my niece. She's in the town. I will not leave her here."

"Do the Reds know she's here?"

"I don't know, Mr. Hawk. I honestly don't know. She came ahead of me and by another route, so maybe they don't."

"If there's anything we don't need on this trip, it's a woman to look out for."

"I will not leave her," he said. That was that.

After a while I tried again. "How do you know she got here at all or is still okay? Why send anybody to a far away village like this to begin with?"

"Because she *could* get here safely, young man. She came out with two other young girls, all of them as lay workers for the convent of French nuns in Jacmel. A perfect cover to get her in and keep her out of sight till I came. It cost me plenty in lies and donations. It had to be here, because this is where the convent is."

"How do we contact her?"

"This one is no nun, Mr. Hawk. She will be waiting and watching, have no fear. She will help and not hinder us. Besides I have the name of a local contact."

"That would be Doctor Beauvoir," I said.

"How did you know?"

"It's the same name I was given in Jamaica. The town's too small to hold more than one big operator. Beauvoir it has to be."

This time even Joseph took an interest.

"Beau-Doc?" he said. "Him big man. Bad. You watch." He drew his finger across his throat in a universal sign.

"Just one more thing I don't understand," I said. "Why didn't you just defect to our side and ask political asylum? Then our official people could take care of you."

"It's not that simple." He was regretful. "I'm not important like a

general. I've worked for both sides and nobody trusts me. Once I talk it will hurt my old employers. They will kill me for sure. If I defect formally, I must talk."

"Aren't they trying to kill you now?"

"First they would like to make me talk. I have papers hidden — they do not know where. As long as that is true, I am worth letting live a little longer. It is possible I can still do them harm. They will try to take me and my niece and sell our lives for my papers. Once I have told America all I know, there is no reason to let me live and every reason for killing me as a warning to others. My silence now is life. *Rien ne pese tant qu'un secret.*"

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave," I quoted in English. My store of quotes is not unlimited.

After a while we slept in our blankets. When the pre-dawn mountain chill woke us there were more mangos and a little cold boiled rice for breakfast. It was not my idea of breakfast.

"Joseph and I are going into town," I said. "There's work to be done there."

"By daylight," Nikko said. "That is too much. They will be waiting."

"Not for me," I said. "Look there." Out beyond the harbor a big white cruise ship was carefully working its way through the protecting reefs.

"In a couple of hours there'll be

five hundred tourists mucking around in there, buying finger drums and ebony carvings and what-not. Who's to notice one more? Besides your pals in there don't know me from Adam's off ox. They're looking for you, or at least two or three men together. If we try to sneak in after dark, we could be spotted in a small place like this."

"You have a point," he said.

"Of course I've got a point. That's what you're paying me for. You just sit up here and watch the boats and eat mangos. We'll go see Beausoir. Tonight, tomorrow, next day — as soon as we can — we'll bring the girl out to you or come and bring you in. By that time I'll also have a way out of here setup. You'll be safe enough on this mountain."

"Ah, yes," he said, "there are plenty of mangos."

We both made a wry face and laughed.

I told him not to touch the few tins of food in my pack. If we had to go back into the mountains, we'd need them. He gave me a password for Beausoir, and another for the girl.

JOSEPH AND I went down the mountain together. At the jungle edge near town I took off the travel-stained khaki I'd been wearing and put on a loose-fitting seersucker jacket and pants that had been in my pack. The jacket hid the gun holstered behind my right hip. Joseph looked natural enough. The

machette was as normal on him as socks back home. We'd left the squirt-gun and the shotgun with Nikko.

A couple of coins tossed to a stark naked ten-year-old bought us directions to Doc Beausoir's place, which was over on the other side of town. We went through the main plaza where the tourists were already gaggling about and sweetening the economy for another week. Joseph and the other locals grinned in their faces and viewed their backs with acid contempt.

Once we passed a drinking joint full of the local Tontons. They were festooned with guns and busy drinking cheap rum. Nobody even noticed the two of us.

The Beausoir house from the outside looked like a cheap Hollywood set for Tara. Tara after the war, that is. Inside it was air conditioned and over-furnished. The doctor was a sallow creole with a confident air and the pin-head pupils of the typical addict. His black housekeeper wagged her hips at me and served glasses of rum and a lunch of rock lobster flambu, *diri et djondjon* (rice and black mushrooms) and mango pie. I passed up the pie.

I established professional status with Beausoir by using the password first. That got us off on the right foot as fellow scoundrels. Only then did I bring up the subject of Nikko.

He was most helpful. "The girl you want goes to the hospital to work in the day. You can take her

out of the streets on her way back to the convent."

That made good sense.

While I was at it we arranged the escape details. Horace had mentioned a very special speedboat that Beausoir had recently purchased. I wanted it. He didn't want to risk it. We bargained awhile. In the end I had to promise that Nikko would fill in one of his Swiss checks for the full value of the boat and leave it "in escrow" with Beausoir in addition to cash to cover all other expenses.

Of course we both knew the check would be cashed whether or not the boat ever got back.

After that we settled the details of where, when, and how we'd be picked up. I didn't want to risk Nikko right inside the town. We'd take the girl out and come back later to a rendezvous point on the beach at a specified time. The boat would come in on signal.

We were still trying to settle the where and when of all this with the aid of a local tide table and an old American Naval chart of the coastline when a couple of truckloads of yelling Tontons went by outside the iron picket fence.

"What's all that about?" I asked. The men in the trucks had been drunk but also armed to the teeth.

Beausoir made a couple of phone calls; talking the thick Creole potois which went right over my head.

"It is not good," he said to me. "They go to look for our friend.

Somebody reported seeing a strange Yankee on the roads this morning."

"That would be me coming in with Joseph."

"They think it might be Monsieur Nikko. They've been alerted a week ago to watch for him. I hope he is not careless."

Beausoir would like to have known where Nikko was camped. He was perfectly capable of selling him out under pressure or for a big enough reward. I don't think he really expected me to tell him, though. I didn't.

"They won't find him," I said. "He's a full day's march back in the hills and well hidden. We came on ahead just in case of something like this."

I wasn't quite as sure as I sounded. Nikko was a smart operator but he was city bred and trained. He might do some fool thing like light a fire to cook or go out in the open just long enough for a peasant to spot him. It takes a country boy to hide in the country. Still, there wasn't anything I could do about it at the moment.

Instead I changed the subject. "What does your government want him for anyway? I thought he never did anything to them."

Beausoir gave me a cynical smile. "No matter. Monsieur le President hates all Yankees. To do your government a bad turn would amuse him. Besides it's a good change to do a good turn to the men in Peking and Moscow. In the long run

they may win, you know. And in the meantime he will ask a good price for cooperation. Anyway life is very cheap here."

That part was certainly true.

Beausoir retired for a shot of whatever narcotic he favored, and came back looking pleased with himself. After that we alternately drank rum punch and dozed in the big rattan chairs through the afternoon.

The heat was awful. It was like being covered with a wool army blanket just boiled in an old-fashioned iron wash pot. I was careful not to overdo the rum bit.

Late in the afternoon Beausoir roused himself and gave me detailed instructions for intercepting the girl on her way back to the convent. He even drew a rough street map on a scrap of paper, and was careless enough to let me put it in my pocket. His fingerprints were all over it. In case he sold us out I could tie him right in with our crowd.

According to him the lay sisters timed themselves to get back in the convent just before dark. After that the streets away from the square and the tourist traps could be dangerous. With the Tonton for police, I was sure they could be for young girls.

Joseph and I cut through back alleys and vacant, weed grown lots to the rendezvous point he'd picked for us. The brief tropic dusk was already thickening.

The three girls were hooded in a modification of the sisters' uniform. They walked arm in arm and looked tired and sweaty after the day's work.

I stepped into the street in front of them, and took off my straw hat.

"Pardon, mamzelles," I said in lousy French. "Qui est Aurore?"

They had to stop or run over me. One of them laughed at my accent. A big, rawboned blonde with a Breton look to her answered. "Who is it that asks, monsieur?" She spoke better English than I did French. "Who is it that asks to see Aurore?"

It was almost full dark and I had to squint to look under the hood, but I was sure Nikko wouldn't risk anything for this girl.

"You are not she," I said in English. "I come from Uncle Barni — from Le Petit Oncle Barni." That was my password.

"It's all right, Elise," the girl in the middle said, and shoved back her hood. I saw grey eyes that flashed, full lips, and a pert, gamin face that obviously missed its usual heavy make-up. I mentally checked off an earlier guess. This one might be somebody's niece, but I'd bet an arm Nikko didn't think of her that way.

She saw it in my eyes and laughed at me.

"Yes, Yankee, I am his amant. I do not deceive you, for I — "

Whatever she meant to say never got finished. The dark street sud-

denly commenced to boil with yelling, running men. If they'd held their tongues ten seconds longer, they'd have had us for sure. Either Beausoir had sold out or I'd underestimated the local Tonton by a country mile. There wasn't time to stop and find out.

I shot the lead man, or at least the one I saw first. The .45 slug knocked him over on his back, but another was coming up fast on my right rear.

Joseph gave a whoop and went at the second man with a terrible two-handed swing of that machette of his. The man kept coming — with only a blood-spouting stump where his head should have been. The body came on four steps before the legs got the message and he collapsed at my feet.

The Breton girl kept her head and pulled the two others into a three-foot wide gap between two ramshackle frame houses. Every door on the block had shut, and every light gone out, as soon as the ruckus started.

The man at my feet had carried a standard Israeli UZI sub-machine gun with a wooden stock. He didn't need it any more, so I took it and the bag of loaded clips hung from his shoulder. It's a beautiful little weapon for this sort of scramble. It weighs less than nine pounds loaded and has a cyclic rate of over six hundred rounds per minute. The magazine holds twenty-five.

The boys had noticed what had



happened to their leaders and dived for cover. They'd be getting their nerve back soon. Even as I straightened one stepped out of a doorway. I used the stutter-gun to punch new buttonholes in his shirt from groin to throat. That gave the rest of them something to think over.

For lack of anywhere else to go Joseph and I popped down the alley after the girls. It was pitch dark in there, but there was nowhere to go but straight ahead. We went.

Neither Joseph nor I knew where we were. The Breton girl — her name was Barbe — did. This had been her section for mercy visits, and she kept her head. She and Aurore were waiting for us in the next street. The third girl had just kept on running. It was too bad. The Tontons would catch her in time and work her over till she told what little she knew. Since she spoke only French, that wouldn't

be much, but she probably could describe me.

We went through another alley and up and down little, stinking slum streets, all in practically pitch darkness. Once there was a burst of firing a long way back where the arm of the law extinguished a stray cat or some careless citizen. It wasn't even close.

Barbe took us out of town through a plantation of bananas where we could stay under cover. Once we got through that and into the forest on rising ground. Joseph took over. Get him into a familiar atmosphere and he could point himself like a compass needle and find his way through the thickest growth. He was patient with us when we slowed him down.

The spot where we'd left Nikko was only a couple of miles back in the hills as the crow flies. Joseph could find it easily enough. There was no reason to think hue and cry from the city could even come close to us in the dark.

I still didn't like the smell of things. Somebody had been smart enough to know who Aurore was and use her as bait to catch us. If his men had been ordered to shoot us down instead of trying to take us alive, I'd be back in the alley dead. I knew it.

The same man might be smart enough to learn, or guess, where we'd left Nikko and set an ambush along our most likely routes to him. It wasn't likely. These storm trooper

types usually prefer to go right in for the kill. But it was possible. I tried to think of a Latin quote to cover the case. No dice. It made me laugh.

The girl Aurore was right beside me.

"What are you laughing at, Handsome One?" she asked, moving so close her shoulder touched mine. It was a soft shoulder, and warm beyond the heat of the air.

"At myself," I said.

Even in the dark I could feel her eyes turn to me. "Myself, I do that often. The more one understands oneself, the more one must laugh. *N'est ce pas?*"

"I wouldn't think you'd be the one for that."

"I am too practical, no? You wonder about Barni. Oh, yes, you do. He is old" — the shoulder pressed mine — "I am not. He has the money, yes. The much money. He has great repute in certain circles."

"That's the reason?" I asked.

"Non — not entirely. Mostly I have always wished to get to *les Etats Unis*. With my past life — no passport. When I learn Barni is coming to the United States, then I make him my *ami*."

"No love," I said.

"For him, no. No. Liking maybe. Desire is for such as you and me."

The going got rougher just about then so I managed to dodge a reply. I hate mixing business and pleasure. Not that Nikko had bought any

more than my services as a guide and guard, of course. I filed Aurore mentally for later reference.

JOSEPH WAS at home in the forest, as Nikko would have been in the city. He led us silently and surely. At times he'd stop and sniff the wind like a big cat.

I remembered the affair on the mountain trail and let him do as he pleased.

We hit the ridge somewhere west of where we'd left Nikko and made a wide circle to come up to him from the landward side. That way the sea winds blew from him to us. We could have smelled a fire and would be behind any party watching him. There was nothing and nobody, until Joseph called out in a low voice and Nikko scrambled to his feet not ten yards away, making as much noise as a truck in the process.

It's a good thing he knew Joseph's voice. He had the shotgun, and the machine pistol as well as his own automatic.

When we joined him he kissed Aurore. Then he pulled his head back and looked at me and kissed her again. It was too dark to see expressions, but I think he knew right off.

We sat on the ground and compared notes. He'd seen the two truckloads of men pass on the road below the ridge. They had gone on back into the hills. That meant, if they were smart, they'd return in

the daylight and comb the ridges and thickets as they came.

Joseph spoke briefly in the patois and Nikko translated. He wanted to go and locate them. I nodded, and he slipped off into the dark.

We decided we'd have to take Barbe with us as well as Aurore. She couldn't go back to the convent for sure, but we could return her to the Sisterhood, or whatever it's called, in Florida. She was a sensible girl and didn't argue the point.

I outlined the arrangements I'd made with Beausoir, and Nikok approved without question. The pick-up was set for the following night as I'd told Beausoir it would take that long to get Barni and bring him in. Nikko didn't even hesitate at filling in a check for the value of the boat. He gave it — and cash for the amount of the originally agreed on bribe. He also gave me a check for twenty-five thousand. He wrote by the glow of a cigarette coal, in thick brush where the glow wouldn't show.

"Aren't you afraid I'll take this and skip out?" I asked.

Aurore came and put her arm around me and laughed her warm, throaty laugh.

"Barni is very wise," she said to us both. "He relies upon the well-known chivalry of the Yankee and Anglais. It is that he shows trust in you, and you will be loyal because of that. A Russian or a yellow man would not. Oh, he is very smart."

Whatever he may have felt about it, Nikko made no effort to recover Aurore. It was his way of telling me he realized that this was no time for bickering. Business first. We needed each other. A man of lesser gauge might have wrecked everything through pique or jealousy. His stock went up with me. Once we were safe, I'd have to watch him. Everything would be changed then.

The night passed in time. I sat with my back against the trunk of a big mahogany and watched. Aurore came and slept with her head on my shoulder. She was really rubbing it in. I don't think Barbe approved any more than Nikko did, but nobody said anything.

Joseph was back with the dawn. He was tired and hot, and as full of news as a mango is of juice. He talked to Nikko in patois and to me in his vile English.

The gist of it wasn't good. The men from town had roused the villagers in the valley behind us and would use them as beaters in a sort of localized "tiger drive" as soon as it got light enough. We were the tiger. Instead of a couple of dozen men after us, we could count on a couple of hundred, plus old men, women and children as watchers.

Joseph had crept into one village and listened to much talk. The people had been told we were foreign devils. They might not fight very hard, but they'd find us if they could. The town men were enough

for the real fighting. They would play hunter to the peasants' hounds.

There was only one thing we could do, and we set about it at once. We had to get clean out of the path of the drive before it arrived. Joseph took us west along the ridge, because the night's rendezvous point was west of town. He figured we'd have to go at least three miles to be beyond the utmost tip of the right hand horn of the chase.

That took us at least a mile past the rendezvous beach, but it couldn't be helped. If we'd gone on down, the drive would have come to shore long before dark. We'd have been pinned down between the guns and the sea without a chance to fight or run. We stayed on the ridge.

Late in the morning we watched more armed men come out of town and spread out to work up the slopes and meet the crew coming in. Then they were all under cover. We saw no more. We drank from a spring and ate the rest of my canned food — and waited.

Nikko produced a pair of small but powerful binoculars from the one bag he'd lugger all the way, and we used them to keep what watch we could on the town, anchorage and open fields. Most of the time nothing of real interest went on, but there were a couple of things I didn't like.

About three in the afternoon a big "fishing trawler," unmarked and flying no flag, came along the coast and hove to right off the harbor

mouth A big, black, powerful looking launch was put over the side, and several men got into it and went ashore The mother ship continued to cruise back and forth off the break in the reefs where the channel went through I had an idea that anyone trying to get in or out after dark would have a tough time of it.

This wasn't a cruise ship day, so the town stayed reasonably comatose under the heat. About four o'clock carloads of men were seen starting out along the shore roads both east and west of the town. Nikko interpreted it the same way I did.

"They're going to watch the beaches, yes?" he asked.

"That has to be it," I agreed. "There are relatively few places free enough of mangroves for us to reach the water and be picked up. They know we have to try it. The back country will be roused by now and all the trails watched. If we're spotted trying to get to Domenica, helicopters from the capital could put men ahead of us on any trail."

"We have no choice?"

"No real choice. We might hide in the hills for a while, but they'd get us in time if we didn't starve first. We go off the beach or not at all."

"Fortes fortuna adiuvat," he quoted. "Fortune favors the brave. And you are brave, Mr. Hawk. But how? The reefs lie just offshore for miles. No boat can cross or go out except for the channel where our

enemies wait. It's the only channel up or down the coast until the reefs end. You know it will be plugged."

"I know," I said. "From here I can see their aces. They can't see mine. And I have one, Dr. Nikko. Believe me, I have one."

"I am a fool, but I believe you. Is it a sure ace, a trump?"

I spoke honestly. "It is unless Beausoir sells us out. That is it is if we reach the beach and he does his part. I'm counting on greed to make him do it. If he sells us, the local militia captain will steal most of whatever bribe or reward is promised. If he is loyal to us, he has much to gain. I think he will, and that I can get us out."

"All of us," he said. "If I don't make it, take care of — "

"Of the women. Yes," I said. I laughed. "And when we get to Florida Aurore will find that I am really poor, and you will become quite irresistible once more. If you wish to be, that is."

This time I got a glance of real respect. "You are sophisticated as well as brave, Mr. Hawk."

We understood each other then.

The most important factor was the timing. X-hour was ten, when the moon would not yet be high enough to help watchers. The beach was a small one where the hills came right down to the water. There were steep cliffs dropping almost sheer for a quarter mile each way except where an old earthquake had split a gash that went back a

long ways as a boulder filled canyon. We could get into the canyon at its shoreward end and follow it down to the little crescent of stony beach, where it debouched from the hill.

It was unlikely the watchers would expect us to come any way except along the beach from east or west. It was a narrow beach but passable because the reefs kept heavy surf from striking and washing it away. The path we used was supposed to be known only to smugglers and such folk.

I was right. There were armed men waiting, but they were among the rocks. They watched the bay and beaches, and talked among themselves, with no thought at all of danger at their backs.

I checked the luminous dial of my watch. The timing must be exact. If we broke through these men too soon, or they held us in a fire-fight, reinforcements would come up and finish us. We had to burst out just as the boat appeared. I'd synchronized watches with Beausoir, but I still worried.

We gave each of the girls a pistol. Barbe would not use hers, but Aurore might. Nikko and I had the stutter guns, Joseph the shotgun and machette. We were none too adequately gunned to tackle a dozen men.

The wind and waves covered what little sound we made. All at once it was time. I waved my arm.

I was braced for anything, I

thought, but not for what came next. Nikko saw his chance to be a hero and took it. The rock-walled canyon at our backs made a natural sound box to magnify and multiply that terrible, vibrant voice of his.

He howled and roared and whooped all at once, and every sound came back a hundred times in inconceivable volume. It was like the screeching of a thousand devils. I added a rebel yell for emphasis.

The sheer volume of sound blew the guards out of the ravine mouth like a hurricane blast. I didn't blame them. It even scared me and it wasn't at my back. Most of them just kept running. The few who tried to stop were chopped down by my gun. In thirty seconds the way was clear.

It wouldn't be for long. That ruckus could be heard for miles. We scrambled down to the beach before the men could return. There was a dark blur on the water where the boat came sliding in, and a half-frightened hail from Beausoir. I answered with his password.

Then we were in the water, scrambling onto the deck and into the boat's cockpit. Joseph and I hoisted the girls in. It was none too soon. There were scattering shots off the beaches, and the searchlight of a patrol boat flicked on half a mile away between us and the town.

I took the wheel from Beausoir. "This is the boat I wanted?"

"The same. What in God's name was that outcry?"



"The devil," I said. "I forgot to tell you he was on our side. You heard him yourself."

He crossed himself. I think he half believed me. I gave him the packet of money and checks. Even that didn't really cheer him.

Now came the really crucial point of the whole escape. We were off the beach, but not yet in the open sea. From the east, the town direction, two fast boats were rushing at us. One was sure to be the harbor patrol, the other the launch I'd seen come from the "trawler". Both would mount heavy machine guns and be full of men. There was no chance to fight.

I turned west and poured on the power. I could run about eight miles in that direction before the reefs curved in to touch a headland and create a cul de sac. I had no intention of going that far. Instead I took a course angling away from the shore. I'd studied it carefully on Beausoir's chart the day before and knew just what I was doing.

There were two boats after us now. The nearest, and coming up fast, was the boat that we'd seen come in from the trawler. It kept a searchlight pretty well on us, even though I steered a twisted course. The other would be the local harbor patrol. That was an old boat, quite a way back and barely keeping its distance, even though I kept my craft well below its maximum potential speed.

After ten minutes of this the unmarked launch was definitely closing the gap. They even tried a burst from a heavy machine gun, but with both target and platform clipping along in a fair chop of sea-way the gunner didn't even come close. It was time for my little surprise.

I swung rather sharply left to come onto the reef line at about a 45 degree angle. The launch came right in my wake and pinned me with his light. That was okay, it kept him from watching anything else.

Then I did what was needed to activate the very special capacities

of Beausoir's boat, and pulled the throttle to maximum speed.

The hydrofoil rose up on its cushion of air only feet short of the vicious teeth of the reef. It went on over riding on a cushion of air, where a rowboat would have scraped and hung. We were out in the open sea.

The launch pilot was either going too fast to stop or assumed we knew a channel. He came right on in our wake, and the coral heads tore the bottom out of his boat. The police boat was way behind. If it came on fast enough it might get to the survivors before the sharks. I wasn't waiting around to see.

We met the schooner Horace had waiting fifty miles off shore. Beausoir and Joseph left us there. Beausoir would leave the hydrofoil in the anchorage at Aquin and go home by the shore road. Once back in his own bailiwick a little time and a

couple of large bribes would put him back in business. Anyway he seemed sure of it; and he should know his own people.

The schooner loafed around the Caribbean and the Gulf for two weeks before putting us ashore at night near Tampa Bay. It was a real picnic for Aurore and me till Horace's canned rations gave out and we had to live on salt cod for two days with the crew.

Once ashore Nikko said good-bye. He had plans to bury himself somewhere in a northern metropolis till his trail cooled.

Aurore went with him. She'd had time for practical thinking, just as I'd anticipated.

Barbe and I drove to Miami in a rented car. She was really a devout girl, and wanted to get back to her order, which had a convent there.

I figured I had a date with my bank.

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THE GUN

Who could he be . . . what could he desire, the gaunt man who bid for an old gun with the last penny he had? John Parker was to learn—only too soon!

by **FRANK GRUBER**

WITH ONE EYE on the big clock John Parker shrunk down under the level of his high bookkeeper's desk and began to peel off his black sleeve guards. The task concluded, he folded them together and slid open the desk drawer a



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DEPARTMENT of LOST STORIES



A previously published story is not necessarily a permanently preserved story, available to anyone. Too often, in fact, it is just the opposite. So transitory is magazine publication alone—usually thirty days on sale—that far too many outstanding tales are overlooked and forgotten before they have their deserved chance at fame and recognition. Here, in this new department, you will read some of the most unusual stories ever written. "The Gun", by Frank Gruber, is no exception. Mr. Gruber is the well known author of such outstanding mystery novels as "The French Key Mystery," "Simon Lash" and many other best sellers. He also has had a distinguished career as a Hollywood screen writer. Oddly enough, he has written only a handful of weird-crime yarns, but they are without exception well worth reading. When you see a story under the banner "Department of Lost Stories," remember that it is a work which in the judgement of a discriminating editorial board is too outstanding to be forgotten. The present short story is no exception. Read it. You'll not forget it for a while!

THE EDITORS

few inches. He dropped the sleeve guards inside and took out a small whisk broom. Stooping again, he carefully brushed his trousers and finally got a piece of thick flannel from the drawer and rubbed the light film of dust from his shoes.

He timed the work very nicely, so that when he straightened and again looked at the clock it was exactly one-half minute to twelve. It took thirty seconds to straighten his books on the desk, so that when

the bell rang he was able to step around the desk and move promptly toward the cloakroom.

Then he met the frowning eye of Mr. Wilton, the office manager. Mr. Wilton kept his glance on John Parker for one moment, then raised his eyes deliberately to the wall clock. Mr. Wilton did not approve of clock watchers and although Parker was not beating the clock, he was a little too prompt to obeying its message.

The incident dulled Parker's enthusiasm. All morning, he had been looking forward to the lunch hour. He wasn't ordinarily a clock watcher, but today he had been planning something special and had wanted to take advantage of every minute of the sixty allotted for his lunch hour. He was even going to skip his lunch. And now the edge of it had been blunted. He wouldn't really enjoy the auction.

This was a good one, too. It had been advertised in the preceding Sunday papers. John Parker loved auctions. A more or less indifferent bookkeeper in the offices of the Arthur Grain Company, he was one of the best auction bidders in the city. He could bid on a dozen offerings and never get stuck once. He had an instinct for it. Although he lived in a small furnished room, Parker would bid with genuine enthusiasm on a mahogany tallboy and at the exact moment when the price was about right, drop out of the bidding and let the competitor have the tallboy.

Take today. The effects of one Harrison Phillips were to be sold. John Parker knew what to expect. Massive old furniture, musty books, a mysterious ancient trunk or two and a miscellany of statuary monstrosities. Parker had about as much use for any of these objects as he would have had for a zebra, but he would bid enthusiastically on everything that was offered, during the brief forty-five minutes

that he would attend the auction, and he wouldn't have to make a single purchase.

It was exactly six minutes after twelve when he entered the auction rooms and found them pleasantly filled with potential bidders. Parker liked competition.

He moved forward and found a seat in the first row which he promptly occupied. He looked up at the auctioneer, a tremendously fat man with a deep bass voice.

"I am offered two dollars and thirty cents," the auctioneer was saying. "Two dollars and thirty cents for this magnificent set of handforged andirons. Ladies and gentlemen, I could get more from a junk dealer. I could—"

"Two thirty-five," John Parker said.

"Two thirty-five," said the auctioneer. "A connoisseur has just entered the bidding, a gentleman of the old school who knows real values. I am offered two thirty-five for these marvelous implements that are as good today as the day they were first forged and which cost the owner perhaps as much as seventy-five or eighty dollars. Two thirty-five; who'll offer five dollars?"

"Two and a half," called a man from the rear.

"Two-fifty, who'll give three dollars? Who'll give two-seventy-five?"

"I will," said John Parker and from that moment on remained quiet.

The auctioneer blustered and cajoled for two or three minutes and finally received an offer of two dollars and eighty-five cents and sold the andirons. He scowled down on John Parker, for the latter was not unknown to the auctioneer.

The auctioneer's assistant brought up a beautiful statue of a nude woman holding a bunch of grapes over her head. It was solid marble and had undoubtedly graced a pedestal in the home of Harrison Phillips for at least fifty or sixty years.

The fat auctioneer scowled at the marble monstrosity and waved it away. He rummaged about on the long counter for a moment, then brought out a huge horse pistol.

"Gentlemen," he boomed. "I say, gentlemen, for this item will interest very few women, but it should delight the heart of every man present, especially those of you who are collectors. Gentlemen, I offer for your pleasure one of the finest items in this entire valuable collection; a dragoon pistol in perfect condition. This beautiful old gun, gentlemen, was the major factor in the winning of the West. It may even have been in use during the late Civil War, although you would not think so, judging from its perfect condition. That is due to the fact that the late owner was a real collector and kept his treasures under glass, taking them out only to clean.

"Now, gentlemen, I am not go-



ing to insult your intelligence by asking you to start bidding with one dollar; I am not going to waste your time with such nonsense, because you know and I know that this rare old dragoon pistol will sell for many times that. So who'll give fifty dollars?"

There was absolute silence in the audience and the auctioneer, clapped a fat hand to his forehead.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, why are you here? Because it's cold outside and it's raining? No, it can't be that, because the weather is beautiful and the sun is shining. Because you're tired and want to rest your feet? It must be that, because otherwise you would be clamoring to bid for this genuine—"

"One dollar!" said John Parker.

The auctioneer gave him a withering glance. "I'll pretend I did not hear that remark. I'll pretend that the gentleman was only trying to have a little clean, honest fun, because no one could be serious in offering one dollar for this beautiful, rare old treasure."

"Ten dollars!"

John Parker blinked and then jerked around in his chair. No legitimate bidder would jump from one to ten dollars, particularly not for an offering such as this.

He said: "Ten dollars and a quarter," then kept his gaze upon the audience in order to find the rash bidder. He had no trouble finding him, for the man was directly behind Parker and the moment the latter had made his offer, the other man snapped: "Twenty dollars!"

A murmur ran through the audience and even the auctioneer took a step forward on his platform and stared down at the rash bidder.

Parker himself, studied the man with great care. He wasn't a professional bidder, of course, but Parker was trying to size him up. He did not look like a prosperous individual if his clothing meant anything. He wore a rather tight fitting suit of broadcloth that had once been black but had a greenish tinge to it now, indicating age and much wear. He was a deep chested, hard-faced man with sandy hair, the latter long overdue for a haircut. He wore a battered black felt hat with a broader than usual brim. He looked like a farmer. In that case, he *might* have money, despite his appearance.

John Parker said: "Twenty-one dollars."

"Twenty-five," came the prompt bid from the other man.

John Parker turned again in his seat, smiling pleasantly, so the other could see there was no offense in the competitive bidding. Merely good sportsmanship. Something in the man's face startled Parker. The eyes. They were a pale, washed out blue; they were staring eyes—and cold.

"Twenty-six dollars," Parker said.

"Forty dollars!"

Parker cleared his throat. Of course the old gun wasn't worth one-half of that, but then Parker wasn't interested in the object of the bidding. He was attending this auction sale for the same reason that some men go to prizefights and wrestling matches. Or ball games.

"Forty-one dollars," he said.

And at last he drew blood. The man behind him gasped hoarsely and his breathing came heavily. "Fifty dollars," he roared.

Parker turned and received such a look of malevolence that he winced and remained silent.

The auctioneer glanced at him and began to do his stuff. "Fifty dollars I am offered for this rare *objet d'art*; fifty dollars—"

Parker could not help himself; the sport was too deeply ingrained in him. He knew that the man behind him was determined to possess the dragoon pistol at all costs and it was not sporting to let him have it so easily. He would value it more if he paid a decent price for

it, if he got it only after a stiff fight.

Parker said: "Fifty-one dollars!"

The effect of this bid was startling. The man behind Parker leaped to his feet and uttered a cry of rage.

"Damn you," he roared. "I haven't got any more money with me. Take the gun—take it and be sorry!"

And with that he stamped down the aisle, out of the auction rooms.

"—Going," said the auctioneer. "Going for fifty-one dollars. To the lucky gentleman with the celluloid collar."

John Parker recoiled. *He* was the lucky bidder. It so happened that this was the sixteenth of the month and only the day before he had received his semimonthly salary—fifty-five dollars. It was all in his pocket, as he had missed his landlady the night before and had not yet paid his room rent.

But he didn't want the gun; he couldn't *afford* it if he did have a use for it. If he spent fifty-one dollars now he would be unable to pay his room rent. He would have nothing left for his meals during the next two weeks. He would—

"Here you are sir," said the auctioneer, "You won after a mighty fine struggle and I congratulate you. Fifty-one dollars—"

John Parker stumbled forward and took the huge dragoon pistol. It was almost a foot long and weighed ten pounds or more. He

shuddered and drew the money from his pocket.

Then he turned and walked out of the auction rooms. At the door he collided with a woman about to enter. She saw the object in his hand and squealed.

Parker sneered at her and stepped aside without an apology. He thrust the big weapon under his coat, pressing his left arm against it to hold it secure.

He walked several blocks up Dearborn before he realized that he was going in the wrong direction and cut west to LaSalle, where he turned south. As he crossed Monroe he noted by a clock in a store window, that it was two minutes after one. Damn, now he would catch it from Mr. Wilton, the office manager.

He continued a little further down LaSalle, then turned into a tall office building and rode up to the twelfth floor. As he entered the offices of the Arthur Grain Company he saw that it was eight minutes after one by the time clock just inside the door.

He strode through the office toward the cloakroom. And there, just as he was about to enter, he encountered Mr. Wilton.

There was a gleam in the office manager's eye.

"Ah, good evening, Mr. Parker," he said sarcastically. "Did you have a pleasant lunch at the club? Did you engage in a little bridge, perhaps?"

John Parker reached under his coat and produced the big pistol. Holding it by the butt he laid the long barrel along the left temple of Mr. Wilton.

Mr. Wilton screamed and fell to the floor like a dead pigeon.

John Parker stared down at the unconscious form of the office manager. He was aware that there was excitement all round him, that his fellow workers were rushing about.

"Parker laid out Wilton!" someone cried in a tone of awe. And another: "The worm turned; Jeez, Caspar Milquetoast conked the boss."

It was true, but to what an extent not even John Parker knew at that moment. He only knew that something had happened to him. It was as if an iron chain that had bound his conscience all of his life had suddenly snapped. He was free.

Wilton had persecuted him a thousand times and at last Parker had struck back. Savagely . . . yet he had no regrets.

He finally raised his head and looked around the circle of faces that ringed him.

"He had it coming to him," he muttered.

"Yeah, sure," Doolin said. Doolin was the office bully. It was he who had put glue in Parker's inkwell. And now he looked into Parker's eyes and took a backward step.

Beyond the immediate circle a

voice cried petulantly. "Here, here, what's going on? Are you people working here or are you just playing games?"

"J. B.," someone said and the office employees began to disperse, leaving John Parker to face J. B. Arthur, the head of the firm.

"Here, you," old J. B. snapped. "Get back to—what have you done to Wilton?" A gasp. "What's that in your hand—a gun?"

"Yeah," said Parker. "You want to make something of it?"

J. B. Arthur's eyes threatened to pop from his head. "What's that? You dare to speak to *me* like that?"

Parker smiled crookedly and advanced upon J. B. The president of the Arthur Grain Company was too astounded for a moment to even move, but when he saw the gun in Parker's hand come up he let out a shriek that could have been heard down on LaSalle Street, and whirling started for his private office in a headlong rush.

Deliberately, Parker brought up the ancient gun. He squeezed the trigger and was not surprised when the gun thundered and a pane of ground glass crashed in the door of old J. B.'s private office.

Arthur screamed again and diving into his office, headed for the lavatory. Gaining its comparative safety, he locked himself inside.

But John Parker did not pursue. He was no longer interested in J. B. Arthur, or anyone connected with the Arthur Grain Company.

He stuck the old revolver under his coat once more and sauntered out of the office.

Outside, he walked to Clark Street and caught a northbound bus. Fifteen minutes later he alighted at Lincoln Park and walked four blocks west and a half block south, finally turning into a dingy three-story brick building.

He entered a door and started to climb a worn flight of stairs. When he was halfway up a woman came out to the landing on the first floor and called to him:

"Oh, Mr. Parker, I just wanted to remind you. You forgot the rent."

Parker turned slowly. "I didn't forget it."

"Then you can give it to me now. Seven dollars for the half month, you know."

Parker said: "Go to hell."

Mrs. Leonard, a stout, motherly-looking woman blinked and then gasped. "What did you say?"

Parker repeated the phrase then turned and continued climbing to the second floor. He walked down the long dark hall until he reached the last room on the left-hand side. He opened the door—it was never locked—and switched on the electric light, for it was so dark in the room a light was needed even in midafternoon.

A man was sitting in the creaking rocking-chair that stood next to Parker's bed. It was the man from the auction rooms, the unsuccess-



ful bidder for the old dragoon pistol.

As Parker entered, the man rose from the chair and towered over Parker. He was no more than six feet tall and weighed perhaps a hundred and ninety pounds, but compared to Parker's five-seven and one hundred and forty pounds he was a veritable giant.

Yet Parker returned him look for look.

"What the devil are you doing in my room?" Parker demanded.

"The gun," the other man said. "I want it."

"Then you should have outbid me."

"I didn't have any more money."

But you don't want that gun. You haven't any use for it."

"I can sell it," Parker said. "It's evidently a rare specimen."

"No, it isn't. It's a plain ordinary Navy Colt. They made thousands of them during the Civil War and this one is no better than hundreds that are still in existence. Any gun collector will sell you one just like it for twenty dollars."

"Then why did you bid fifty dollars for it?"

"Because it's my gun."

Parker glowered. "If it's your gun how'd it happen to get into the effects of Harrison Phillips?"

"His father acquired it some years ago. Harrison Phillips didn't know to whom it belonged originally. He kept it in a glass case all these years."

"Then why didn't you buy it from Phillips?"

"I couldn't. He wasn't the right type."

"And you think I am. Well, you're wrong. I'm not. I bought this gun and I'm going to keep it."

"It'll be the sorriest thing you've ever done. I know, believe me. You see, I was the same type."

John Parker took the gun from under his coat and hefted it in his hand. "I like the gun."

"Yes, I know. And you've already used it. Another inch to the right and you'd have killed J. B. Arthur. Next time you won't miss."

Parker's eyes became slits.

"What do you know about J. B. Arthur?"

The other man shrugged. "I saw what you did. You laid out Wilton and then you took a potshot at Arthur. And now you're planning to take a shot at me."

The hair seemed to stand up on the back of John Parker's neck. But there was no thought in his mind of backing down.

"Who the devil are you?"

"The original owner of that gun."

"You're crazy. You said yourself that Harrison Phillips' father had acquired this gun from the original owner. I happen to know that Harrison Phillips was over seventy when he died."

"That's right. His father got the gun in 1862."

Parker laughed harshly. "Now, I know you're crazy. You're not over thirty-eight or forty at the most."

A grim smile played over the big man's mouth. "I killed my first man—with that gun—in 1864."

Parker hefted the big revolver once more, then suddenly pointed it at the other man. "All right, put 'em up. I'm going to call the wagon and have you taken back to that booby hatch from which you—hey—!"

Parker pressed the trigger and the room rocked to the deafening explosion. Through the haze of black smoke came a mocking laugh. "I'll see you again."

Parker was completely alone in the room.

He whirled and leaped to the door. A quick glance down the hall showed him that it was empty. He darted back into the room, circled the rocking-chair and sprang to the window. It was down tight—and locked.

There were no closets in the room, only a row of nails in the wall upon which hung Parker's meager supply of clothing.

"I'll be damned," Parker muttered. "Where'd he go?"

After a moment his eyes came to a focus on a patch of broken plaster behind the bed. He straddled the bed and examined the plaster. Yes, a bullet had gone in here. He'd completely missed the big man. Either that or the bullet had gone clean through him and embedded itself in the wall. But in that case, the man wouldn't have been able to make such a swift getaway. In fact, he couldn't have made a getaway anyhow. Yet he was gone. The smoke from the black powder had made a haze and he had seemingly disappeared into it; but he had been a little hazy before that. It was the reason Parker had fired.

Damn it. His eyes. There was something wrong with them. Parker rubbed them fiercely with his knuckles. It didn't seem to help any. Or hurt. He saw about the same as before.

He turned to the door but before

he stepped out he heard the heavy tramp of many feet.

He leaped out and thrust his gun down the hall.

"Stand where you are!" he thundered.

The hall was full of policemen. They had guns in their hands.

"Take it easy, buddy," the leader of them declared. "The heat's been too much for you, but you don't want to get into no more serious trouble than you're in now. Put down that cannon."

"Back," snarled Parker. "Get back or I'll blow the lot of you to hell."

"Don't shoot!" cried the policeman. "I'm sure Mr. Arthur won't press his complaint. We got our duty to do, but don't—"

Parker fired into the solid mass of blue. In the confined quarters he couldn't miss. The ancient Navy Colt made a tremendous noise as it went off. Police revolvers barked in reply and bullets splattered along the narrow hall. The aiming was very poor, however. The policemen were too demoralized. They were already trying to retreat and as Parker charged, firing into their midst, they broke completely and pitched down the staircase.

One or two lost their footing and tripped the others and the lot of them went down in a solid pile. Except a couple who remained on the hall floor upstairs.

Parker followed to the stairwell

and sent one final shot after them. Then the hammer clicked on an empty cartridge. With an oath, Parker drew back. He tried to snap out the cylinder and found that it was a stationary one. In fact, the revolver didn't use cartridges. It had a series of tiny nipples over which were fitted small copper caps. The loads were evidently forced into the chambers from the front. In short, it was a cap and ball pistol. And Parker, having used up all six loads, couldn't reload.

He swore roundly and retreated down the hall. There was a fire-escape at the rear of the building. He navigated it successfully, coming down to the ground in the back-yard. He clambered over a wooden fence and scooted through a semi-dark hallway of a house and finally emerged upon another street.

By that time he had put the gun away under his coat and walked swiftly up the street. At the corner he turned east and found a drug store. Entering he went to the telephone at the rear of the store and consulted the classified phone directory. He found what he sought under "G" and nodded in satisfaction.

TWENTY MINUTES later, John Parker stepped out of an elevator in a dingy building on Wells Street and proceeded toward a ground-glass door. He pushed it open and entered a gloomy gunsmith's shop.

The walls were hung with scores of guns of all shapes and sizes and in all stages of repair.

A fat, bald man with grimy hands got up from a work bench and came up behind a glass counter. "Yes, sir," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"I've a gun," Parker said. "I'd like you to look at it." He took it out from under his coat and extended it to the gunsmith. The latter took it and sniffed the muzzle.

"It's been fired lately."

Parker grunted. "I was doing some target practice with it."

The smith nodded and twirled the cylinder, then snapped the trigger. "It seems to work all right."

"Oh, yes, that wasn't what I wanted. I'm interested in getting an idea of the gun's value, that's all."

"Oh Well, it's a Navy Colt. Probably the best revolver ever made by Samuel Colt. So good that almost every gun you find of its type is still in working condition."

"What's it worth?"

"That's the trouble. Colt made six hundred thousand of these and a good many thousand are still in existence. Maybe twelve-fifteen dollars."

"This one's worth more," growled Parker. "A good deal more."

"Not to me it isn't. I've got a half dozen in the shop now."

"As good as this one?"

"Every bit. I'll show you."

"But you can't shoot them. The bullets—"

The gunsmith smiled. "A good many gun fanciers still shoot these guns. I carry a supply of caps, balls and the old-time paper cartridges."

"Let's see them," Parker cried eagerly.

The gunsmith hesitated a moment, then shrugged and went to a shelf. He brought out three boxes of different sizes and putting them on the glass counter, picked up Parker's Navy Colt. He detached the small ramrod and used it to remove the used copper caps.

He replaced them with new from a box and then picked up a paper cartridge containing powder. He tore the paper with his teeth and poured powder into a chamber after which he wrapped a lead ball into a flannel patch and poked it down on top of the powder.

Parker watched the proceedings closely, but when the gunsmith had loaded three chambers he suddenly snatched the gun from his hands. "I can fill the rest myself. Now bring out your money!"

The gunsmith's mouth fell open in astonishment. "What—what?"

"You heard me; shell out. This is a hold-up."

"But—but I haven't got any money."

"I'm going to count up to three," Parker said, ominously. "One—two—"

"I'll give it to you," cried the gunsmith. "Just a minute and I'll

give you everything I've got." He scrambled to an old steel safe and began fumbling with the combination.

He got it right after a couple of attempts and swung open the door. His hand darted in, he whirled and came up with a very efficient looking automatic. "Now—" he began.

That was the last word he ever spoke. The Navy Colt in Parker's fist thundered and the .36 caliber bullet whacked into the smith's head.

Parker sprang around the counter and swooped down upon the open safe, hurdling the dead body of the gunsmith. He reached into the safe and took out a tin-box. A chagrined exclamation escaped his lips for the box contained only three one-dollar bills.

He stuffed the money in a pocket and came around the counter once more. He picked up the three boxes containing caps, powder cartridges and leaden balls and distributing them about his person left the gunsmith's shop.

At the elevator bank he pushed the down button. The light overhead showed white and the elevator door opened. A man stepped out and Parker took a backward step.

It was the big man who claimed ownership of the Navy Colt.

The elevator door clanged shut and the big man grinned wolfishly at John Parker.

"Nice going," he said. "A couple

more today and you'll equal my record at Centralia."

"Who are you?" Parker gasped hoarsely.

"Don't you know?"

"No, but I think—say, how'd you know what I just did?"

"The same way I knew about what you did at your office, then at your rooming house. I was watching you."

"But you couldn't have!"

"Oh, but I could. And I'll be watching you right along. You're pretty good—with *my* gun."

Parker reached under his coat and gripped the butt of the revolver. The big man held up his hand. "Save your powder; I've a proposition to make to you."

"Talk fast," said Parker. "Talk fast, because I'm getting awfully fed up with you and—"

"Swell. I think you'll make a good partner. Now, listen, I've cased this layout and I think it's a soft touch for two good men. We ought to get, *mmm*, thirty thousand."

"Dollars?"

"In good Federal notes. No Confederate stuff."

"Where is it?"

The big man laughed. "Is it a deal?"

"I'm keeping the gun."

"All right, keep it. I've got a six-shooter of my own. We may have to use our guns, but you're not afraid of that. They can't hang you any deader for one more. And you

can do a lot of traveling with fifteen thousand dollars."

Fifteen, thought John Parker. Thirty thousand—and one extra bullet.

AT PRECISELY TWELVE noon of that day, John Parker had quailed under the frown of Wilton, the office manager of the Arthur Grain Company. Now, ten hours later, Parker was reading the evening edition of the morning newspaper. A headline screamed at him:

KILLER TERRORIZES CITY

And in smaller headlines:

Bookkeeper Runs Amok. Shoots At Employer, Kills One Policeman, Wounds Another and Murders Gunsmith. One of the most Dangerous Killers in Annals of Police History.

The big man, who said his name was Howard, touched John Parker's arm. "All right, we'd better get started. But I'm warning you, it's going to be close. If you haven't got the nerve—"

Parker tossed the newspaper out of the car window. "Let's go!"

He stepped on the starter and as the motor roared, shifted into low. It was a big, powerful car. Parker had picked it out on Michigan Boulevard. He shifted into second and zoomed up West Adams Street.

They crossed the river and turned left into Canal Street. Parker found a parking place by a fire hydrant and stopped the car. He locked the ignition and put the key

in his pocket where he could get it quickly.

"Now, we'll see who's got the nerve," he said to Howard.

Both got out of the car and walked across the street to the huge railroad terminal. They entered and walked briskly up a ramp into the giant waiting room.

"Take a look around," suggested Howard. "We've got to head the right way when we're finished and there are so many doors—"

"I know this place as well as my own room," Parker said and then wondered if he had really known his room at all. Howard had made a rather easy getaway from it that afternoon.

They approached the ticket windows, but when they reached them made a sharp right turn and went to a door, marked *private*. Howard rapped on the door with his knuckles.

Inside a voice called: "Yes?"

"Despatcher," Howard replied.

There was a moment's pause and then the door was opened a few inches, by a man in a blue uniform. Howard put a big hand on the man's chest and gave him a violent shove into the room. He followed himself, but Parker swarmed around him and whipping the big Navy Colt from under his coat laid it across the head of the railroad employee. The man went down to the floor without a sound.

At a ticket window on the right,

the seller turned around casually. Howard waved a gun at him. "All right, Mister. Come back here and open the safe."

"And make it snappy," Parker snarled.

The ticket seller trembled violently. "But I c-can't open the vault," he gasped. "It's—it's got a time lock on it."

Parker sent a bullet smashing into the floor at the ticket seller's feet.

"The time lock better not be working," he said, "or *your* time's up. Come!"

The trembling ticket seller hurried back toward the huge steel vault. He put his hand on the big dial and hesitated once more.

"I—I can't—"

"All right, Parker," said Howard.

John Parker stepped up behind the ticket seller and rapped him sharply over the head with the long barreled revolver, but not hard enough to knock him unconscious.

"I'll count three," he said. "One, two—"

"I'll open it!" screamed the ticket seller.

At the far end of the ticket seller's compartments a couple of men were scrambling under counters. A small revolver banged and a bullet ricocheted off a desk near Parker. Howard answered the shot with one from his own gun and Parker, to hurry the man at the

safe, raked the side of his face with the gunsight on the Navy Colt.

"Hurry!"

The terrified ticket seller spun the dial to the right and then to the left and again to the right. He gripped the wheel on the door, twisted it and pulled on the door. It came open.

Parker struck him again with the revolver and the man fell forward on his knees, into the vault.

"The money," Parker ordered. "And damn quick."

Behind him a pitched battle seemed to be going on, but Parker paid no heed. He was leaving all that to Howard. Gunfire wasn't going to distract him from the main part of the job.

The ticket seller, blood streaming from his head, was bringing out stacks of bills. Parker stuffed them into the side pockets of the light topcoat he had acquired earlier in the evening. They were satisfying packets of bills.

The ticket seller raised his hands. "That's all—"

"Fine," said Parker and shot him through the head. Then he turned and coolly stepped out of the vault.

"All right," said Howard. "Now, let's see how you are on the getaway. A job doesn't count unless you get away."

Parker ran to the door leading into the waiting room proper and whipped it open. A policeman was

charging upon him, less than thirty feet away. Without breaking his stride, Parker sent a bullet at the policeman and saw him pitch forward on his face.

Policemen seemed to be coming from all sides, then. Parker and Howard ran, firing to the right and left. Bullets whizzed about them and one raked Parker's left shoulder. It stung, but the pain wasn't much.

And then they were clear of the railroad station and running across the street to the parked car. A policeman was standing beside it, writing out a ticket.

Parker let him have a bullet, right in the stomach. As the man went down, he jerked open the door by the driver's seat and climbed in behind the wheel. He got out the ignition key, started the car and jerked it away from the curb. At that moment, the policeman lying in the street got out his service revolver and taking careful aim, fired.

A sudden roaring filled John Parker's ears. For a moment a red haze appeared before his eyes, then it vanished and he saw the huge concrete pillar directly before him.

He knew that he ought to turn the wheel of the car, but couldn't. As if from a distance he heard the crash.

Howard said: "Are you ready to give me the gun?"

Parker knew that it was only a

matter of seconds. "Take it!" he gasped.

Howard shook his head. "No, I can't take it. You've got to give it to me."

The gun was in John Parker's hand. But it was heavy—heavy. He tried to lift it and couldn't. He saw alarm come into Howard's face.

"I—I can't lift it—"

"You've got to," Howard cried. "It's sixty years. It's too long. You've got to give me the gun. Try. Try hard!"

Parker tried once more and blood gushed from his mouth. "Who—who are you?" he quavered.

"Don't you know?" Howard exclaimed. "I'm the original owner of that gun. I'm . . . Jesse James!"

"But you said your name was Howard."

"Of course. It's the name I always used. I couldn't go around telling people I was Jesse James, could I? A hundred Pinkerton men were looking for me, a thousand sheriffs, twenty thousand Federal soldiers. And none of them got me. No man ever got me as long as I had that gun on me. And then—then I put it down one day. I stepped up on a chair to straighten a picture and Bob Ford killed me. Shot me from behind, the dirty little coward. They wrote a song about it:

"The dirty little coward

Who shot Mr. Howard—?"
The roaring was in John Parker's ears again. He was slipping down—down.

"Jesse James," he said. "The gun of Jesse James. So that's why—"

"Of course, of course!" said Jesse James, impatiently. "The gun's cursed. Every man who owns it is cursed. That's why, I have to get it. I—I can't rest until I get the gun. Give it to me, Parker. Give it to me—and die!"

There was an ounce of strength still in John Parker's body. An ounce of strength and a grain of will power. He co-ordinated the two and brought up the Navy Colt.

"Take it!" he said, and died.

STATEMENT BY AMOS WILLOUGHBY

"I knew he was batty when he started bidding for the gun. It was a piece of junk, worth maybe ten or twelve dollars as a museum piece. He said a dollar, then before I could say a word he raised the price to ten dollars. From then on he kept raising himself until he got up to fifty-one dollars, when I knocked the gun down to him. Can you imagine a guy bidding against himself? Sure, he was batty. Every time he made a dollar bid he squirmed around like he was looking at another bidder. And no one else made a bid against him!"

THE DARK HOUR

by EVELYN BOND

Once, a long time ago, he had killed, for a good reason. Now, careful as he had been, he was a prime suspect. Should he tell them the real story — or be a fugitive for the rest of his days?



THE DINNER dishes had been cleared away at last, but Anne Castle wasn't sighing with relief when she sat down in the soft chair.

She had reached a self-conscious state of life, in some ways, and took pleasure in doing extra work after her husband had got back from the job. Perhaps she wanted to show that she wasn't wasting time while he earned money for the family. It was a silly habit in some ways, she supposed, but middle-aged women were all like that.

She reached for her son's sweater on top of the sewing kit. Having arranged the lamplight so that it fell on her lap, Anna was finally easing the proper thread color through the

needle's eye when her son suddenly put on the television set so loudly in the next room that in sheer surprise she pirked herself.

The near-silence lasted until she was ready to turn over the sweater and saw the last crosswise thread diagonally across the pattern she had created at the back of the garment. When an interruption did come, its source was totally unexpected.

Sam suddenly said, "Get me a drink."

Anna looked up, startled. Her husband was sitting in the soft chair with the longer base that was diagonally opposite her.

Sam Castle was a man of dark features in a smooth, unlined face. He had a temper, heaven knew, but



Anna appreciated the fact that he did his best to keep it down.

He wasn't angry now, but he was upset enough to break a habit of long-standing. He never took more than one drink in a twenty-four hour stretch, and his hiding the fact from prospective clients and other people was part of the folklore, as he liked to call it, among

his managerial colleagues over at Midland Insurance.

"What's wrong, dear?" Anna asked, almost lightly. "Is the world in worse shape than you thought?"

"Just get me the drink and don't ask questions." He closed his eyes heavily. "It's taken twenty years to happen. Twenty years."

His use of the number made her

sit up straight and then hurry to do what he wanted. Every New Year's Eve since they had known each other he would say to her quietly, just after midnight, "Well, it's been two years," or "three years", adding one number every New Year's Eve. He never mentioned it from one New Year's Eve to the next, though, which was a blessing.

Anna prepared gin and tonic for him at the sideboard and brought it over. He drained it quickly, but Anna noticed that his eyes didn't leave the opened newspaper he had been reading so casually up to a moment ago.

"What can have gone wrong after all that time?" she asked, getting out the words carefully.

"The police have caught somebody and say that he did that thing."

He started to tell more, but she glanced pointedly over toward the closed door of the room, where Jerry was watching television.

"Let's go upstairs and talk," she said urgently. "Please."

"All right."

She had hoped that they'd go quietly and not catch their son's attention, but her hopes were dashed by the creaking steps. Jerry called out and she hesitated and said that everything was fine. She never would understand how their son could hear them with the television going and his mind on his school work. The younger generation's tolerance of noise and their capacity

to work in spite of it were simply beyond her.

They walked up more slowly, though. Never before had she seen Sam's back stooped over slightly, but that was the way she saw it now. She made a point of walking upright.

Not until they reached the bedroom did she realize that she had carried the sweater and needle and thread and thimble upstairs with her. She put them down slowly, as if letting part of the life drain out of her body.

"What did happen, dear?" Anna asked slowly. "According to the newspapers, I mean."

Sam Castle sat down on the bed and clasped his hands tautly. "The police caught a burglar for assault as well as for burglary. He was wearing a sharp-edged expensive ring that didn't jibe with his cheap outfit. The inscription had been filed off that ring, but police scientists brought it back with acids and found that the ring belonged to—Alfred Mettay."

She hadn't heard that name from his lips since the night before they had become engaged, when he had insisted on telling her that he had once killed a man in self-defense and never been accused of it. He didn't give her any other details about the killing, but pointed out that she'd have to decide whether or not to marry him after what she now knew. Anna had never been sorry about her decision.

"This man, this burglar," Anna

began carefully. "Has he been charged by the police for that crime?"

"He certainly has," Sam said grimly. "That's why something has got to be done about it."

"But from what you say, dear, the police have got evidence against him for other crimes, too."

"Not murders, but for assaults with deadly weapons."

"In that case," she said, immensely relieved, "the murder charge makes no real difference, because there isn't any death penalty in this state and the man is bound to be put away for a long time."

"If the real killer comes forward to tell the truth about the Mettay case it might show a reasonable doubt in his favor for the other crimes."

Anna said, "You'll destroy yourself and me and our son."

She looked down if only to help get her ideas together. What had started out as an average night was going to end with her having to fight for her home and family, for everything important to her.

"There's no reason in the world for you to practically have to commit suicide." She might have been talking to the furniture for all he seemed to have heard. "You've been honest and respectable, and you shouldn't have to destroy yourself because you once did something to a man in self-defense."

"I killed a man," he said patiently. "I didn't 'do something' to



him. He didn't 'pass away', either. He died violently because I choked him to death with these hands and ran out."

Sam picked up the phone.

"I want the nearest police precinct," he said, adding patiently to the operator's question, "No, it's not an emergency. My phone number is—"

But Anna had pressed the phone bar downwards, breaking the connection. She faced her husband from the other end of the night table, leaning forward.

"At least talk it over with Berry before you go to the police, Sam. Do that much for me and Jerry, at least."

Donald Berry had handled a negligence action for them a few years ago, collecting a handsome amount for them from the township

because Jerry had broken an arm. He was a pleasant man and a sympathetic listener.

"He's not a criminal lawyer," Sam said, shaking his head fiercely. "That's what I need."

"Ask him to recommend one and then talk it over. Please."

He finally agreed to do it. Berry recommended a fellow named Norman Jesperson. Anna was half hoping that a night ride to the criminal lawyer's office would help bring back a sense of proportion, but Jesperson said he'd come out to see them instead. He turned out to be a thick-bodied man who dressed neatly and talked in a deep but well-controlled voice.

"Before we go any further I suggest you give me a check and I'll let you have a receipt," the criminal lawyer said. He flushed at sight of Sam's twisted grin, then added, "It establishes a lawyer-client relationship so I won't have to repeat what you tell me."

Sam wrote out the check. Jesperson examined it only casually before putting it into his pocket.

"Newspapers aren't the best news source in this world," the lawyer said after he'd heard a guarded version of Sam's story, not much more than he had ever told his wife. "Here's how we'll handle it, Mr. Castle. I'll look into the case tomorrow and give you a report in the afternoon. That ought to be all right."

Sam Castle had to give in. He

spent a restless night, of course, and so did Anna. In the morning she made him promise to phone as soon as he heard from the lawyer. She couldn't help adding that she was sure everything would be all right, and she wished she hadn't noticed the pitying look that her husband directed at her as a result.

Anna forgot to call Rose Markell, with whom she was supposed to have lunch that afternoon. A worried Rose called her instead and it took time to get her off the phone. She prepared dinner with only half her attention, if that much, coiled on a spring while waiting for the phone. But she found herself hardly able to move when the phone did ring at about half-past two.

It wasn't her husband, but his secretary. Miss Lamb sounded worried.

"I don't think Mr. Castle is feeling very good," Miss Lamb said. "He doesn't want to see a doctor because I asked him and he said no. He didn't want me to call you, either, but maybe you should come over here. Make believe it's casual, that you just happen to be in the city, if you know what I mean."

"Doesn't feel well?" It was something else going wrong that she hadn't expected. "What happened?"

"Well, a little while ago he got a phone call and he told me not to take any more calls for him. He just sits and stares in front of him."

A phone call? From the lawyer? "I'll be there as quickly as I can."

Having got dressed, she remembered to write a note for Jerry and leave it on the kitchen table. It took forty minutes with delays before her car took her to the city. Miss Lamb was typing furiously in her cubicle at the Midland offices when Anna got there, out of breath, and started past her.

"You can't go in there right now, I'm afraid," the secretary said, surprisingly. "Your husband is talking to somebody and left orders that he wasn't to be disturbed."

"What's the name of the person he's talking to?"

Miss Lamb had to look it up. "Jes-per-son. Mr. Jesperson. He's the same one called a while ago, just before Mr. Castle started to look real sick."

"I'm going in."

Both men looked up startled as Anna opened the office door, but Jesperson finally greeted her with a nod. As for her husband, his smooth and unlined face was strained and white. Sam looked away at sight of her.

"What happened?" Anna Castle asked.

"The police have just dropped the other cases against that burglar," Jesperson said easily. "They claim there's no substantial evidence. The only case against him now is the one with some circumstantial factors. The Mettay murder."

Anna was furious rather than numbed. Her first thought, surprisingly, was that she wished the law-

yer would work only from his own office. When she talked to him again, she couldn't help sounding angry.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm making arrangements for your husband to talk to the police officer in charge of the investigation," Jesperson said. "I'll be with him all the time."

She started to say that it didn't seem as if he would be doing much, but Jesperson was on the phone, speaking briefly to a police lieutenant named O'Keefe. He made an appointment in an hour's time, although Anna gestured to him frantically to put it off for as long as possible.

"He'll be leaving the office soon," Jesperson said to her when he hung up. "The quicker we know where we stand on this, the better for all of us."

Sam left the office first, telling Miss Lamb that he wasn't sure when he'd return. His back was stooped once again. Anna walked behind him and automatically got into the car at his side. He and Jesperson glanced at each other, probably trying to decide what to do about her.

"You'll wait in the car for us when we get there," Sam said.

He would probably never drive again, he told himself.

Police headquarters was gray looking and large. A desk sergeant in a wide anteroom led them—Anna



had stubbornly joined the men as soon as they stepped inside—to a small office. There were only two visitor chairs, so Anna stood. She warned herself not to let out a cry no matter what she heard, not to talk at all as long as her husband was in this room.

Frank O'Keefe, the police lieutenant, was a dapper man with probing eyes. Rather than subjecting Sam to an instant grilling, as Anna had more than half expected, he looked only at Jesperson. The lawyer's presence made everybody else in the room unimportant, or so it seemed.

"As I told you over the phone," Jesperson began, "my client wants to give you some information about the Mettay murder."

"After twenty years." O'Keefe's voice was deep, and he slurred his

words. "Would this be a confession?"

Sam wasn't able to answer. O'Keefe must have taken Sam's agreement for granted. He nodded and leaned back comfortably.

"Self-defense, wasn't it?" he asked.

Before Jesperson could talk, Sam said, "He started to punch me in the face and I went for his throat. He pulled out a knife and I—well, you know."

"There was a knife in Alfred Mettay's right hand when he was found." O'Keefe scratched his jaw with a thumbnail.

"I've got a scar from that knife on my left hip."

He looked at Anna for confirmation and she caught herself nodding. She had never known that the scar related to the murder, not having heard details of the crime until now.

"Your blood type is AB, I suppose. Traces were found on the knife tip. Unfortunately, the man we arrested has got blood of a different type, as we've found out after tests. We've been getting ready to let him go."

Anna covered her mouth with a shaking palm. Sam said nothing, but suddenly shaded his eyes with a hand.

"With the help of your testimony, though," O'Keefe added almost casually, "we can hold on to him and go ahead with the prosecution, Mr. Castle."

"I don't understand that," Sam said carefully, "if the blood type doesn't fit."

"It becomes obvious what really happened," O'Keefe murmured. "There was a fight between you and Alfred Mettay. He punched you in the face and then drew a knife. You choked him, left him on the floor and ran. Our suspect is a burglar with a previous record of assaults. He broke into the apartment, saw Mettay unconscious and started helping himself to some goodies. Maybe when he grabbed for Mettay's sharp-edged gold ring the man started to become conscious again. There was a fight, with Mettay in a weakened condition. Our man was then able to finish the job you started."

"How can you be sure?" Sam asked weakly.

"The burglar is thin and five feet one inch tall," O'Keefe said comfortably. "No jury will ever believe that he took the ring off a six foot bruiser like Mettay unless Mettay was already in a weakened condition."

Sam shut his eyes. "I see. Yes, I do see now. If I had come forward twenty years ago, I might not have had to go through all the hell that has just about wrung me dry since then."

"You'll have to testify at the trial, of course," O'Keefe said, "but the D.A. will see your case my way, I'm sure. There won't be any prison for you, Mr. Castle. Thanks for

coming in, and keep yourself available."

On the way out they said so long to Jesperson and got in to Sam's car for the trip back to the office. City traffic was slow and awkward, this time. At a stop for a light, he turned to her.

"Things will be better now," he said.

She smiled back at him, but hoped it wouldn't occur to the lieutenant back there that the burglar might have been the first one to come into the victim's apartment at that fatal time after all, hitting Mettay from behind and then grabbing for the loot. Twenty years had passed since then and the burglar had committed many other crimes, so he didn't remember what had actually happened. Sam had encountered a weakened Mettay immediately afterwards, so that Sam had killed Mettay after all.

Anna Castle hoped that her feelings didn't show as she looked at her husband's smooth, unlined face which couldn't ever have been punched by a man wearing a sharp-edged ring.

But, like Sam himself until a few moments back, she'd be on pins and needles for a long, long time to come. Sam had disclosed his secret to a public official, but a secret of sorts had been transferred to Anna's shoulders as well. She could keep it tensely and hopefully, but in a darker world than she had ever known.

THE TIN COFFIN

Somewhere in that pool of death lay the answer to a grisly riddle. Could he find it in time?



by GROVER BRINKMAN

THE ANCIENT farmhouse with its peeling paint frowned down on the littered, weed-grown yard, its rotting roof swayback as a Burmese temple. Vines and creepers had in-

terlaced the sagging window shutters as if nature, disgusted, was making a last supreme effort to erase an ugly sore.

There was no sign of life in the house, no sound other than the banging of a section of rotted guttering as the breeze stiffened. Yet Sheriff Web Harris, tired and disgusted after a futile, four-day search was at last positive that the man and woman who had robbed the Excelsior State Bank were inside.

Clever, the method they used to ditch their getaway car!

He would never have known, had he not stumbled upon Cindy Matthews as she caught that good-sized carp in the deep sinkhole in Persimmon Creek.

Cypress County was one of the largest in the state. As sheriff, Web Harris patrolled an area much too large for one man and a lone deputy, Jim Frazier. There was simply too much terrain. The county had its sore spots as well. The south part was a cypress swamp that provided its name, Persimmon Creek, really a small river, was a line of demarcation. To the east an outcropping of limestone cliffs fronted the lower flood plain, once the site of rather extensive quarrying operations. Now, however, the limestone had been mined, the tunnels empty and deserted.

Funny how the dice roll at times!

When Jim Frazier's voice had cracked over his car radio, Web

Harris had been coming in on highway 17.

A man and woman held up the bank, his deputy informed him, both of them masked. They were headed south on highway 17.

"Now that's real foolish!" Harris said, already classing them as amateurs. "We'll bottle them up fast!"

Highway 17 led through the cypress swamp, a lesser version of the Tamiami Trail. No side roads. A blockade at the road's junction with U. S. 40 was all that was needed. A radio appeal found two state highway troopers on that highway near the junction. Web Harris was assured their immediate cooperation.

"A masked man and woman," he explained, "driving a 1969 Chevy, black two-door. Throw up a road block in case they get by me."

Later he made a second radio contact with the state troopers. "They've got a hostage," he said. "Kevin McCarthy —"

"Who's Kevin McCarthy?" the trooper wanted to know.

"The aged president of the bank," Harris explained. "That complicates things a bit."

Web Harris pulled off the road at a rise known as Marble Hill, waited. He unlimbered his shotgun, checked its twin loads of buckshot, ready to step out of his patrol car at the opportune moment. His long-planed, youthful face was grim. The fact that old Kevin McCarthy was with them cautioned his thinking: He couldn't afford a shot if Kevin

was in the way. But he would stop that car somehow!

The minutes ticked off.

Strangely, no holdup car appeared on the little-used secondary road.

Harris checked his watch. He was perhaps twelve miles south of town. The holdup couple had had ample time to be here, as of this moment.

Seemingly they had vanished into thin air.

This in itself didn't make sense, for there was no way out except this one artery leading south through the swamp.

He radioed his deputy. "Why did they take McCarthy as a hostage, Jim? There must be some reason."

"Mitch Doelling, the cashier, is here right now," Jim Frazier said. "He thinks they're after far more than the six grand they got at the bank."

"What, for instance?"

"Old Kevin's coin collection."

That might be a factor. Web Harris knew that Kevin McCarthy ranked high in the numismatic world as owner of a coin collection he had painstakingly built over the long years in the bank. He knew as well that McCarthy kept the collection at his home, in a heavy wall safe, so that he could work at will.

This brought up some more questions: had the bandits holed up for the specific reason of going back to Kevin's home, with their hostage, as soon as the chase cooled down?

How had they known of his coin collection, for instance?

That premise built a supposition into certainty: the pair had disappeared somewhere in the area, holed up so good that they didn't at the moment fear the law.

But where?

This thing had been mapped in advance, without doubt. The strategy used suggested some local connection as well.

Web Harris knew several sawmill operators unscrupulous enough to hide a man and woman until the heat was off, if the pay warranted. There was the old limestone caves, as well, dozens of them, all ideal hiding places.

They wouldn't hole up in any of the vacant houses scattered over the area, he reasoned, for the simple fact it would be far too obvious. It had to be one of two things: a sawmill camp, or the abandoned limestone caves.

The road blocks were still being maintained, the troopers assured. No one had showed, and they were just as puzzled as he. Harris started checking the sawmill camps, taking his time.

This was logging country, miles and miles of swamp woodland. He had nine different camps to check, each one with a dozen or more tarpaper shacks. It took all of two days, most of the third.

He was winding it up without a clue.

Then at an isolated shack, he got an invitation.

"You're a bachelor, Web; why

don't you forget about that star and act sociable?"

She was still young. Cornsilk hair and a good figure; nicely chiseled face, plus a wide, sultry mouth. Hemmed in by the swamp, lonesome. Her name was Cindy Matthews, and she was married to a logging truck driver who evidently was away from his wife far too much. She had been in his office once, complaining that her husband had beaten her with his fists.

"This is business, Cindy," he said, his smile tight.

"I got a bottle. Let's mix business with pleasure — "

He declined the bottle, but he went inside, asking questions, hoping for some stray word.

He was soon aware of one thing: she wasn't interested in his questions.

She came up close. "Web, remember that day I came to your office? Ever since, I've felt you're a man who could be real decent to a woman — "

He pushed her back, gently but firmly. "Maybe some other time, Cindy."

She stood there, toyed with the buttons on her blouse. "I'm not interested in rain checks, Web."

He had a growing admonition that she knew something about the bank robbers, but had a price on the information.

Suddenly he felt his eyes on a closed doorway, evidently a bedroom.

"What's inside?" he asked.

"Nothing but a mussed-up bed — "

She stood near the door, and as he turned, she pushed against him. Her arms reached upward, encircled his neck. Hungry lips pressed hard against his own.

"You real concerned about the bank robbers, Web?"

"Of course I'm concerned."

A hard smile built on her wide mouth. She moved her body closer to his.

He realized his hands were hard as he pushed her back. But her resistance was just as stubborn. The smile built on her face. Her eyes were focused on his own. Some little devil seemed to dance in their depths.

"What do you know, Cindy?" he challenged.

"Maybe I don't know a thing — "

He was reading her differently. "Don't lie," he said.

"You want that drink now?"

"No, I don't want the drink!"

She backed off. The smile washed out. "You look tired, Web. I'll fix something to eat, some hot coffee. Maybe I've got something to say after all."

"Better say it now."

She didn't answer him, turned to the stove.

He pumped some water into a basin, bathed his tired eyes, washed his face, combed his hair. She looked good — so good. But not now.

An enigma was building in his mind, trying to put many vague in-



cidents into proper focus. If he remembered correctly, when she had come into his office some time ago, protesting that her husband had used his fists on her, she had mentioned some woman, blaming her for her own marital trouble."

The smell of coffee made Web realize how hungry he was. She swung away from the stove now, she enigmatic smile still on her face.

"Did you check Rufe Carson's place, Web?"

There it was!

In his office she had mentioned a woman, Jill Carson.

"This tramp's got my husband all tied up in knots," she had said at the time.

"I checked Rufe's place," he answered now.

"You didn't find Jill?"

"No, Rufe said she was in town."

"Rufe was lying!" she interrupted, turning back to the stove, to stir the fries.

Harris walked to her side, put his hands on her shoulders.

"What are you trying to say, Cindy?"

Her young face was hard, grim, as she swung to face him.

"I'm telling you my husband and that tramp, Jill, robbed the bank, Web!"

It belted him hard. It came so unexpected, in venomous tone. His first thought was basic — she's squealing on her husband, if she's telling the truth. Why is she doing that?

Before he could voice his question, she supplied the answer. Her hands raised to her blouse, pulling open the top buttons. Deep, enticing cleavage!

He saw the blue-black bruises on her, the work of a man's hands.

He felt the anger come up fast, and choked it down with an effort. It was instinct to reach forward, pull her into his arms.

Instead, he turned away. She rebuttoned the dress, put the food on the table, and they sat down, facing each other.

You haven't any proof that they robbed the bank."

"No proof."

"Then what makes you think they did?"

Because Jake talks in his sleep, for one thing."

"Talks about what?"

"Kevin's coin collection — "

He rose from the table at last, smiled at her, perhaps more appreciative of her earthy exoticism than he cared to admit. "Thanks for the supper, Cindy. I'll check with you tomorrow."

"Where are you going now?"

"I haven't explored the caves yet."

"Let me go along!"

"Forget it! You might get killed."

She pulled in a big, deep breath — for his benefit, of course — held it as he went through the door.

"You really coming back tomorrow, Web?"

He countered with a second question. "You think your husband Jake will be home?"

"Jake won't be home, ever. If I thought that, I wouldn't be untrue to him!"

He still had the feeling that she knew something she had not divulged. And he doubted what she had said, in her frustration and anger. Her husband, Jake, evidently was playing the field with a tramp,

and she wanted to hurt him. But that didn't exactly pin a bank robbers' tag on either of them.

Web pulled out of sight, parked the car, contacted Jim Frazier via radio.

"Anyone showed at the McCarthy house — "

"No one," the deputy assured him. "I deputized Lee Albright, as you suggested. He's camped inside the McCarthy house — "

"Keep him there!" Web ordered.

"There's one more thing," Frazier said. "Rollie Griffith came into the office just a few minutes ago to tell me that he'd taken a shot at the fleeing bandits as the car passed his store."

"I didn't think Rollie was that brave. But evidently he missed."

"Right!"

The next morning, Web Harris started for the abandoned limestone caves, checking them out, one by one. These cavernous underground rooms stretched for several miles. He wound the patrol car through the empty corridors, alert for a sudden encounter. All he found was the ashes of a campfire, and strewn beer cans, attesting that teenagers had been here at some drinking binge.

His headlights suddenly caught a bright reflection of metal, in a narrow side corridor. He stopped the car, beamed his spotlight on the crevice. An old tarpaulin had been thrown across the cut, sealing it off.

Moments later he found the automobile, a late model sedan.

The getaway car! Or was he mistaken? The enigma deepened.

He searched the caves again, even more carefully the second time. But there was nothing in the car. The gas tank was full, attesting more his supposition it was there as an escape vehicle. But where had the man and woman holed up?

It was three in the afternoon when he came out of the caves.

Web Harris was a stubborn man, efficient in his job. But he was near the end of his rope. This was the fourth day. He was confident that the pair were still in the immediate area. But by the same token he was ready to admit his defeat in the smoking-out process. He needed help — to check out Cindy's story, for one thing.

Cindy Matthews, fishing in the deep catfish hole of the creek!

Harris braked the car, got out.

"That's funny," he said, apparently puzzled at what he saw. "A German carp."

The sultry mouth smiled at him as she faced him.

"They're biting, Web. I've got four, all carp."

"Carp are never in this deep sink, Cindy."

She seemed puzzled at what he said. Her eyes challenged him. "Well, a whole school of carp are here today."

He walked over to a grove of saplings, cut down one of the slim shoots, denuded it of branches. Presently he turned it into a pole,

about ten feet long. He walked to the edge of the shelf of rock, wormed down the mossy rock until he was at the pool's edge. There was a different color to the water today, a murkiness he had never seen before.

He poked down the long pole, probing, once, twice. Then there was a dull, metallic thud. He probed further, and suddenly a grim smile built on his face.

He walked to the patrol car, called his deputy.

"Get a wrecker to the Persimmon Creek bridge, soon as you can," he said. "Bring that deputy, too, and anyone you think might be a good man."

He went back to the creek, looked at the German carp Cindy had caught. They were all good-sized fish, in the two-to-three pound range.

"What's so funny, Web?" Cindy asked, evidently still puzzled.

"We'll see, as soon as the men from town get here," he said, started unlimbering his gear. Again he checked the shotgun.

THE WINCH WOUND tight, and from the depths of the sink hole an automobile slowly emerged, slightly battered, its glass shattered on the right rear door. At last the car was on the rock shelf. Web Harris opened the door, a sudden feeling of nausea in his stomach.

"It's Kevin McCarthy!" someone said.

"Rollie didn't miss, after all," Jim Frazier muttered.

It was all adding up at last. Kevin McCarthy, a hostage who was no good dead, had changed the original plans. As Web Harris saw it, the car in the cave was the actual getaway vehicle, to be used at the appropriate moment. The man and woman had ditched the holdup car in the sinkhole in a desperate attempt at total disappearance, hiding in the old farmhouse nearby.

Perhaps in their original plans, they intended to go back into town at night, to force Kevin McCarthy to unlock his numismatic safe, but his death by a stray bullet had changed that. So they had sunk the car in the sink hole with its gory passenger. They had hoped that the old farm house would give them seclusion until the chase died down.

"Kevin McCarthy was a mighty fine man!" one of the onlookers said.

"He's dead, and we're supposed to bring in these jaspers alive!"

"That's right!" Harris said. He walked over to Jim Frazier, with his instructions. "We'll throw a cordon around the house, use tear gas. And no wild shooting!"

They were in the littered yard now. Harris took the bullhorn from Frazier's hand, faced the house. "Hello, in there!" he said. "We know you're inside. We've got the car out of the sink, I've found the getaway machine in the caves. Come out with your hands above your

head, or we'll smoke you out. You have five minutes!"

No response. No movement. The time ticked off.

Web Harris handed the bullhorn to his deputy. "Keep talking to them. I'm going to circle around to the back. That's the way they'll come out — more cover."

He circled, listened to Jim's voice. Two minutes! One! Thirty seconds! Okay, here it is"

Harris heard the tinkle of glass, as a tear bomb found a window. It was followed by a second. It wouldn't be long now. He took up his position behind a tree, watching the rear door, counting off the seconds.

Someone kicked open the door with a vengeance, come out, running hard for the fringe of the trees. It was Jake, Cindy's husband. The woman came right after him. Both had guns, and they were shooting as they came, evidently trying to clear a path.

Web Harris' shot kicked dust in to their faces.

"Throw down your guns!" he shouted. "The next time — "

He didn't finish. They didn't intend to heed. Either they were blinded by the gas, or presumed they could make the woods. Harris cursed as a slug nicked his arm. He shouted once more. But it didn't stop them. They were fast closing in.

He raised the gun, took the man low. He saw a leg crumple as he pivoted and went down.

The woman screamed, threw her gun away.

Web Harris gathered up the weapons, let Jim Frazier take care of them, glad it was over.

Back at the creek bridge, he saw that an ambulance had backed up near the dripping car.

Web Harris saw Cindy Matthews at that moment, leaning against a tree, pale of face. He walked over to her, dropped an arm over her shoulders.

"You were right," he said. "Jake and that woman called Jill."

"They're dead?"

"No, they're not dead."

"Why didn't you kill them?" she asked, her voice brittle. "They both deserve it, don't you think?"

"We've got law to decide things like that."

She walked over to the shelf rock, picked up her string of fish, the four carp.

"How did you know?" she asked. She still seemed puzzled, shocked. "I didn't know — until I saw you were catching carp."

"I don't understand, Web."

"This is a deep sink hole," he explained, "an exclusive catfish hole. Never caught a carp there in my life, much as I've fished the creek."

Her eyes still didn't entirely comprehend.

"Carp are sewer fish, carnivorous," Web Harris explained further. "They feed on carrion, things a catfish won't eat. They smelled Kevin's body in the car — "

Cindy threw down the fish as if they had suddenly turned into some abhorrent thing. Moments later she regained her composure, faced him with a tight smile building on her face. She pulled in a deep breath, held it.

"Want to help me with that bottle now?"

Complete in the Next Issue:

SNAPSHOT OF A GUNMAN

An Exciting Novelet

by RONALD FIELDMAN

A gent named Death was dealing the cards and Murder was written on mine, as I followed a trail that started from nowhere and could only end in the cemetery. Don't miss this powerful story of sudden death!



the bad actors

"Pay the ransom," the guy said. "Don't fret. They won't be around to spend it."

by LOUIS RILEY

WE WERE IN the back room of Solemn Sol's bar and grill on St. Charles, and I was getting more restless by the minute.

"Your deal, Lucky," said Big

Lefty from behind a cigar clamped vise-like in his square jaw.

"I know, I know," I said testily.

I shepherded the cards together and regarded my two companions

with distaste. Big Lefty sat leaning back opposite me with his hands clasped comfortably behind his curly black head, and Little Manuel sat on my left, picking idly at his nails with an evil looking stiletto.

Finally, disgusted, I slammed down the cards and glared at the pair. Their eyebrows shot up in amazement.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Big Lefty.

"It seems to me," I said, "that we should be trying to figure a way of making some dough instead of sitting here on our thumbs playing gin rummy."

Little Manuel flicked his knife shut with a disturbing clack.

"You're right, Lucky," he said. "I'm almost broke and can use some money. I think we should go out and do something."

Big Lefty sat up and placed his huge paws on the felt-topped table to look at us through his cruel black eyes.

"Cool it, boys," he growled. "I can't think with you guys jabbering away fifty to the dozen."

"Well," said Little Manuel, "I need some money."

"Me likewise," I added, emptying my glass of bourbon.

At that point a buzzer under the table sounded. I got up and raised a small piece of velvet hanging over a thin crack in the door to peer out, into the tavern proper.

Dapper Jimmy Jackson, second in command to Vince Collins, who

was the local head of the national syndicate, was striding down the length of the bar, followed by two of his cohorts.

As they approached big, sad-eyed Solemn Sol, I studied them closely. They didn't seem bent on any mayhem, so I motioned for someone to give the okay signal. Lefty pressed a button under the table that blinked an electric beer sign on the wall opposite the bar where Sol could see it and so know the visitors were all right.

I returned to my place at the table, and, in answer to Big Lefty's inquisitive eyes, said: "The syndicate."

In a moment there was a discreet tapping at the door, slick-haired Little Manuel rose to open it. Solemn Sol stuck in his bald head and said: "You boys got company, Lefty."

"Fine," said the wide-shouldered hood in this gruff voice. "Send 'em in, Sol."

The three syndicate men entered and seemed to fill the small room with an ominous atmosphere. We shook hands all around, then Jackson turned to his two boys. "You fellows can wait in the car. I'll be all right with these guys."

Nodding and coldly silent, the pair left, pulling the door firmly shut behind them.

"Nice to see you, Jimmy," Big Lefty said. "Sit down and have a drink. Manuel, go get another glass."

"Thanks, Lefty," said the blond

eaded Jackson. He patterned himself after his boss, Vince Collins — ho, save for his nefarious activities, could be nominated as one of the best dressed men.

Little Manuel was back in a take with a fresh glass; then Big Lefty poured out a round of double cookers and passed them around. Looking steadily at Jackson, he said: I know you're not in the habit of making social calls in our neck of the woods, Jimmy. So what's on our mind?"

Jackson sipped at the bourbon, set it down delicately, then said: I got a problem, Lefty."

"Let's hear it already."

Jackson cleared his throat. Somebody has put the snatch on 'me."'

"I'll be go to hell!" I exclaimed. Putting the arm on Vince Collins was like playing footsie with a school of man-eating piranhas.

Amazed, Big Lefty said: "Who in the hell would be dumb enough to try a stunt like that?"

"Porky, the walking bookie," answered Jackson grimly. "He talked Crazy Sam and Nasty Narvel into the job. This afternoon when Vince was in the payoff line at the fifty dollar window, Sam was in front of him and Narvel was behind him. Next thing you know they came out with the old iron and hustled him clean out of sight."

I whistled low. "Crazy Sam must have gone stone crazy."

"You ain't lying," agreed Big Lefty.

Jackson went on. "Sam called me early this evening and said they want one hundred grand, or else."

"Or else what?" Manuel asked idiotically. Big Lefty silenced the little dice palmer with a murderous look.

I stared at Jackson. "A hundred grand?"

He nodded. "In twenties. And believe me, it ain't easy to scrape up five thousand twenty dollar bills on such short notice."

"I can imagine," Big Lefty agreed. "But where do we come in, Jimmy? You know we don't figure in no syndicate business."

Jackson lit a cigar and expelled a cloud of aromatic smoke. "When Sam called this evening, he told me he wants an ethical free-lance hood to deliver the ransom. They don't trust no syndicate men."

Big Lefty nodded. "And so you came to us."

"Naturally. You guys are the only honest crooks in town."

"This is true," lied the big left hander. "But wait a minute, Jimmy. What's in this thing for us?"

Jackson smiled, reached in his jacket pocket and came out with a wad of bills. Laying ten C notes on the table, he said: "There's a grand. When you deliver Vince there'll be another nine Gs. Good enough?"

"Fine," said Big Lefty, scooping up the currency. "Now what's the deal?"

"You fellows be at the club a little before midnight. Sam said he'd call again between twelve and one to give instructions to whoever we got to bring the dough."

"Good enough," said Big Lefty. "We'll be there."

"Okay. Just remember this: Don't try anything on your own tonight. This is syndicate business, and so after you get Vince back these boys belong to us. We'll get 'em no matter where they wind up. Once Vince is in the clear, their hours are numbered."

"Right."

Jackson suddenly stood up and flicked imaginary dust from his immaculate gray suit.

"Well, boys," he said, "I got some other items to take care of. I'll see you later at the club. Do you have transportation?"

"Yeah, Jimmy," I said, "I got a station wagon over at the apartment garage."

"Good. Well, I'll see you dudes later."

We all shook hands with him again, and in another moment he was gone.

Big Lefty split the thousand dollars between the three of us, then we sat around drinking and smoking and discussing the foolish trio of kidnapers until it was time for me to go get the car.

At eleven-thirty I walked the two blocks over to the garage, got out the white station wagon and drove back to Solemn Sol's to pick up

the boys. Big Lefty settled into the front seat while no-shoulders Manuel got in back.

The big free-lancer flicked imaginary dust on his lapel and then said imperiously: "Take us to the club, James."

"Yes, sir." I gave him a mock salute.

We arrived at the club about five minutes before midnight. The place is a low, squat building about one hundred feet by one-fifty. Whitewashed adobe veneering gave it a Spanish effect, and the ornate archway at the front entrance enhanced the motif.

The structure sat in the center of a huge well-lit parking lot, but the only thing to identify the building was a two-foot high blue neon sign above the archway in the form of a club—as in a deck of playing cards.

This was the headquarters of Vince Collins, the provincial crime king who'd forced his way up through the ranks from the gutters of Kerry Patch in St. Louis. Admission was for club members only, plus their guests, most of these being either politicians or expensive call girls.

My four-year-old heap looked like a junker compared with the flotilla of high-bracket limousines huddle around the front entrance, but drove among these golden chariots and parked right in the middle of them just as though the Chevy belonged there.



Little Manuel said: "Damn! You know, Lefty, if we'd join the brotherhood, we could ride around in crates like these."

Big Lefty craned his thick neck to peer at the little felon through his evil black eyes.

"Manuel," he said in his coarse voice, "you got to be kidding. Once you're in the organization you're in till death, which happens very frequently and violently to certain parties. You're better off working with us once in a while. The way we operate, you can accept a proposition or say jam it, and you don't have any other commitments to worry about."

"That's right, Manuel," I horned in. "Besides, I don't appreciate your casting aspersions on my wagon."

Big Lefty said: "The hell with all this yakking. Let's get inside and see what's going on."

We got out of the car and followed the big hood's confident stride over the gravel to the club's front door. With a sausage-like finger he pressed a buzzer and stuck his disreputable puss in front of the speakeasy type window, and the doorman opened up immediately.

"Come in, come in, boys," said the mobster. He was almost as brutal looking as Big Lefty, and the tell-tale bulge in his threads indicated he was at least as heavily armed.

We entered an elaborate and artistically designed foyer, and the ugly doorman motioned for us to follow him. To the left was an archway that led to the club proper, and on the right was a bank of small chambers—or private game rooms, as they were labeled. At the far end of the hallway was a huge oaken door with gilt-edged lettering that read: *Vince Collins Enterprises—Private.*

Swinging the door open, the gangster stood aside and we walked in to find an elegantly decorated den-like office with paneled walls, stuffed moose heads and race horse pictures, plus a host of other sporty-type artifacts.

Jimmy Jackson sat behind Collins' desk, smoking quietly on a cigar, and looking very much like a top flight executive—which indeed, in our eyes, he was. A black leather briefcase lay in front of him.

To the left, along an eight-foot Rathskeller, sat three men on stools. I recognized; Bart Clemens, Shark

Waters and Evil Goldberg. Three nice fellows. Nice, that is, if they are not after you.

Another man, one whom I did not recognize, and who had been pacing the lush carpeting when we came in, was small and wore horn-rimmed glasses so dense they dilated his blue eyes all out of proportion. He peered intently at us as we crossed the floor to confront Jackson.

"Sit down, boys," Jackson said cordially, waving the stogie. He indicated the bespectacled man. "This is The Teller. He's our emergency financier. He had to make the rounds today to gather in all these twenty dollar bills, here—" he tapped the attache case with a gold-ringed finger—"and he's still in a sweat from the exertion. Heh, heh! You know the rest of the fellows, so just make yourselves at home and we'll wait on that phone call."

We nodded all around, and then Big Lefty went over behind the bar to fix himself a strong drink of bourbon with a bourbon chaser. I don't know where he puts it. Little Manuel sat down in a big plush red leather chair and was immediately engulfed in it.

I sat on a corner of the desk and opened the briefcase. There were numerous bundles of twenties inside, each bound with a rubber band. The sight of all that gray-green in one place was intoxicating.

Jimmy Jackson took out one of

the bundles and thumbed it meditatively.

"You know," he said softly, "it's really amazing what some morons will do to get stuff like this. The lengths they'll employ is truly amazing." He chuckled the money back into the valise and snapped it shut.

Big Lefty sauntered over from behind the rathskellar, swirling his potent drink.

"Speaking of morons," he said to Jackson, "those idiots don't know what a hundred grand looks like. Why don't you give the fools counterfeit green? They wouldn't have sense enough to know the difference anyhow."

"I thought of that, Lefty," said Jackson, "but I don't want to take a chance on them recognizing it before Vince is in the clear. We don't give a wino's damn about the dough. The word is out. Wherever they wind up they won't have time to buy a newspaper with any of this money. We have people all over the world, and somebody, somewhere, will put the make on them. Bang! Whoever nails them not only gets a tidy little bonus, but all they can salvage from the hundred Gs to boot."

Big Lefty whistled. "Say, Jimmy, does that include us?"

Jackson smiled and shrugged his tailored shoulders. "I don't know, Lefty. You boys are not in, you know. This is an internal, or you might say a family affair. You are being paid to redeem Vince Collins.

From there on out it's syndicate business. If you accepted a contract for a hit you would be automatically in whether you liked it or not. So, no, Lefty, I don't think you should butt in on this—that is, if you want to stay free-lance. Just do your job, collect your pay, leave and forget it. From there on out, baby, they're ours."

Big Lefty thought that over. Then: "Yeah, I guess you're right, Jimmy. But I just happened to think. These guys are pretty nuts, so I don't like to go out on a deal like this with just our three pieces. You don't happen to have a snapper handy I could borrow for a while, do you? We may need it in case they get cute."

Jackson arched his clipped blond eyebrows. "A tommy gun? Sure, Lefty. It might come in handy, at that. And you're right. You never know what these kind of jerks will come up with. Come on with me and I'll get you a dandy."

Big Lefty and Jackson left the room and I went over to mix myself a drink. From where I stood at the bar, Manuel was sunk so far into his big chair I could barely see the little gonif.

At that point the ivory-white phone on the desk shattered the quiet. The pasty-faced Shark Waters deserted his barstool and went over to answer it.

"Yeah? . . . Yeah, we got somebody . . . Yeah, they're free-lancers

. . . Yeah. Big Lefty, Lucky Jack Silver and Little Manuel."

As he'd been speaking into the mouthpiece, The Shark had motioned me over to the phone. I set down my bourbon, walked over and took the instrument from his pale-fingered hand and said hello into it.

"Hello," said a gruff voice. "Who's this?"

"Lucky."

"Lucky Jack?"

"Right."

"Lucky, this is Sam. You know—Crazy Sam."

"You said it," I agreed.

"Huh?"

"Never mind. What's the scene?"

"You get the hundred grand in twenties?"

"Right. Get on with it."

"Well," said Sam, somewhat hoarsely, "bring the dough to the public phone booth in front of the drugstore at 47th and Belmont. Stand by that phone, and when it rings you'll get further instructions. The spot is being watched, so don't have any syndicate goons with you."

"I'm not in league with these fellows, Sam. You know that. But I'll tell you something else," I said crisply, "I'm going to have Big Lefty and Little Manuel with me."

"That's okay. We know all of youse. Do you give your word you guys won't pull anything?"

"You have my word, Sam. We want Vince Collins. You want the dough. We swap even. After that you're on your own."

"Good enough. But that money better be legit. We know queer when we see it. And it better all be there."

"It's not phoney, and it's all there," I told him.

"You better be right. Or Vince gets sliced all the way up to his neck."

"Loud and clear, pal. Okay."

"Okay. Go to 47th and Belmont," he said, and hung up.

I cradled the phone and looked over at Manuel. The little criminal was sound asleep in the confines of the big chair, a peaceful grin on his dark Latin face.

I turned as Lefty and Jimmy Jackson returned to the room. The notorious blackhead had a vicious looking submachine gun nested lovingly in his bulging arms. He patted the snapper fondly.

"Guess what, Lucky?" he said, smiling wide. "Jimmy gave me this chatterbox as a bonus for tonight's job of work."

"Fine," I said. "And as Mr. Holmes so aptly used to put it, the game is now afoot."

"Eh? How's that?"

I told them about the phone call.

"Then what in the hell are we waiting for?" crowed Big Lefty. Let's get rolling."

I nodded toward the red chair, where Little Manuel was snoring. "We'll have to wake up the runt. He suddenly decided to take a trip to the Spanish Pavillion."

"Ha!" snorted Big Lefty. "I'll wake him up." He stalked over and

jammed the barrel of the machine gun against the sleeping Manuel's small stomach. "Wake up, you little hoodlum!" he shouted, twisting the barrel in the short man's gut. "Snap to it, boy, or I'll send you home permanently!"

Little Manuel stirred uneasily, then opened his dark eyes. He gaped stupidly at the business end of the chopper, then fearfully gawked up into Big Lefty's evilly grinning face.

"*Madre Dios!*" he exclaimed, trying to force himself deeper into the chair.

Big Lefty laughed and shifted the Tommy toward the ceiling. "Did I scare you, Manuel?"

Little Manuel crawled. "I don't think that's funny, you big *Marone!* How would you like it if I woke you up with a stiletto at your throat?"

Big Lefty reached down and patted him on the shoulder. "Sorry, Manuel," he apologized. "I just wanted to get you up in a hurry. It's time to go get Vince."

The little man got up and straightened his clothes. "So let's go, already."

I picked up the briefcase containing the ransom money as Jimmy Jackson said: "Now, remember, boys, don't do nothing on your own. Just get Vince back here in one piece. I'll have the rest of your dough ready and then we'll all go on about our normal operations and then you guys will forget about tonight. Okay?"



"That's jake with us," agreed Big Lefty.

We filed out of the club, and I put the dough between Big Lefty and myself on the front seat of the car.

Little Manuel again climbed into the rear.

It took me only fifteen minutes through the sparse traffic to reach the phone booth. The drugstore was closed and the only illumination was the corner street light. I got out of the wagon and went over to lean on the brick building, next to the public phone. Lighting a cigar, I had just got it going good when I heard the first ring. I waited for the second before I answered.

"This you, Lucky?"

"It ain't no answering service, Sam."

"Good. Now listen to this: In a couple of minutes a green Ford

sedan will drive by there slow. You get in with the money and we'll go get Vince. I guarantee nothing will happen to you."

"And I'll guarantee you this," I snapped, "I'll get in your Ford as a gesture of good faith. But I won't get in with the dough. Big Lefty will follow us in my car. He's armed to the teeth, so your so-called guarantee had better hold water."

It was a full thirty seconds before he came on again. "Okay, Lucky. But we want to look your heap over to make sure it's just you and Big Lefty and Little Manuel."

"Good enough. We're all by our little selves."

He hung up and I went back to the car to report.

"Don't worry about a thing, Lucky," Big Lefty assured me, sliding behind the wheel. "I'll tailgate that wreck so close we'll look like a city bus."

Little Manuel thought that was very funny, and he laughed.

In another minute, I made out the green sedan coming toward us from the opposite side of the street. It cruised by slowly, and I recognized the craggy contours and toothless countenance of Nasty Narvel at the wheel. He made a U turn and then pulled abreast of the station wagon.

Crazy Sam got out from the rear door and walked around my buggy, peering intently into the darkened interior. He was a short stocky man with thin blond hair and a bull neck.

Big Lefty said: "What are you looking for, Sam? You want to buy this car?"

"Nothing, nothing, Lefty. Just checking, is all."

"There's nothing to check, you dumb pickle-head. You got our word, ain't you?"

"Sure, sure, Lefty. But—"

"But, shmut," Big Lefty cut in. "Let's roll. I'm getting thirsty."

"Okay, okay, pal. Come on, Lucky." Crazy Sam held open the front door of the sedan where I got in beside Narvel, then he returned to his back seat. "Let's go, Nasty," he said, and we were off, with Big Lefty sticking to our tail like he was hung up there.

Neither of the kidnapers spoke as we drove through the ominous south side streets of the night, and their stern tacit behavior struck me as ridiculously funny. They were acting like movie type hoods.

Eventually we were in the county, and then in the country, rolling quietly along on a macadam highway. We turned off this and were on a gravel road, after which we bounced over a bumpy old dirt lane. Big Lefty bounded along recklessly behind us, and I found myself suddenly feeling great concern over the springs and shock absorbers of my car.

Finally, we pulled up in front of an old farm structure. A kerosene lamp could be seen burning in what would be the front room of the rundown house, and there was no more

glass in any of the splintery window frames. Everybody got out of the two cars. Big Lefty had the briefcase in his right hand, and the machine gun was cradled in his left arm.

Crazy Sam froze as he did a double take on the menacing piece of ordinance.

"What's that for, Lefty?" he croaked.

The big blackhead waved the weapon carelessly. "It's for you, boy, if everything don't come off kosher tonight."

Sam gulped, then motioned for us to follow him inside.

As we trooped across the rickety porch and into the shack, I heard the motor of a Piper Cub idling out near the dilapidated barn. So that was how they were going to go . . . They were going to fly out . . .

Inside the barren and dimly lit front room, we found the third member of the snatchers seated at a wormy table with a deck of cards spread out before him for solitaire. He was Porky, the walking bookie. He was abnormally fat, and his features were actually porcine. In a surprisingly resonant voice, he said: "Good evening, gentlemen." He regarded the hard-eyed Big Lefty and his potent armament. "I see you fellows travel adequately equipped for any emergency."

Big Lefty snorted. "You don't have to worry about it, hog head. You got our word. Just make sure we don't have to go back on it. Where's Vince Collins?"

The fat man grunted, then smiled and said: "Alive and well, and living in the next room to your right, there. He is a bit tied up at the moment, as you may go see, but I want your word that you will not untie him until after we have made our departure."

I scooped up the lantern and went to the room on the right, opened the creaky old door and looked in. Vince Collins was trussed up on a chair so tight he looked as though he'd been snagged by Frank Buck.

I said: "Hi, Vince. You all right?"

He nodded his red head. I told him we'd be with him in a minute, then went back to the table and set the lamp down. We could have wiped these crumbs out in a matter of seconds and saved the syndicate a considerable bundle, but we'd given our word to the snatchers, as well as to Jimmy Jackson that we wouldn't butt in, so what can you do?

"Now," said Porky, "may I see the money, please?"

Big Lefty handed Little Manuel the Thompson, then went over and swept the fat one's playing cards to the floor. He opened the satchel and dumped the ransom on the table top where it tumbled into an impressive and beautiful pile. He pointed at the money.

"There's twenty five packages of twenties here," Big Lefty said. "Each bundle has two hundred bills, which is four thousand bucks. Count 'em up."

Porky's rivet-like eyes glittered as he gloated avidly over the dough, then he thumbed nervously through different packages, checking for counterfeit.

"It's all here," said the round man finally, scooping the currency back into the leather. "Sam, you wait here and watch them while Narvel and I go to the plane. When you hear him rev it up, you come running and leave these men to redeem our erstwhile hostage."

"Okay, Pork."

The pair of them left, lard-belly toting the dough, and after about forty-five seconds we heard the Cub's engine revving up. Stone Crazy Sam afforded us an inane wave and said: "So long, boys, and thanks for keeping your word." He ran out into the night to board the getaway plane.

Big Lefty carried the kerosene lamp to the room on the right and set it on the floor. Little Manuel laid the machine gun down beside it, flicked open his long-bladed shiv and began to cut Vince Collins loose. The roaring of the little airplane was loud, now, as it reached the point downwind where it could commence the takeoff.

Little Manuel had sliced through the last rope binding Collins to the chair when the fiery redhead suddenly snatched up the chopper from the floor and bolted out of the house like a wild man to circle around the field. We gaped at each other in mute astonishment, then

followed him out with the plane's engine thundering loudly in our ears.

The Piper Cub was coming on fast, and was about fifteen feet off the ground as she roared by on a course parallel to the barn. Collins dropped to one knee and zeroed in on the aircraft with the tommy gun. He fired a long continuous burst at the hapless plane, and I could make out the horror-stricken features of Nasty Narvel just before the glass splintered to shred his face into a bloody pulp. Next, Collins must have hit the gas tank. It must have really been loaded, for the Cub suddenly exploded and fell sickeningly to the earth, where it was engulfed in red hot consuming flames.

In a matter of seconds it was a charred, smouldering hulk. The three occupants were now nothing but glowing cinders, and all their money had gone up in smoke. I found myself feeling sad about the dough.

"That'll learn the bastards!" spat out Collins from behind the hot, smoking machine gun.

"Amen," agreed Little Manuel, crossing himself reverently.

We drove the syndicate boss back to the club, where we got the other nine grand for our labors, plus a few pats on the back from Collins and Jimmy Jackson, who was very happy about the way everything had turned out, and then we headed back to Solemn Sol's to finish out the night.

As I drove along the deserted

streets, Big Lefty and Little Manuel kept grinning at one another. I said: "If you two want to be alone, why, just say so. I'll drop you off at a hotel or something."

Both of them laughed loudly then Big Lefty said: "Tell him, Manuel."

Little Manuel giggled; then: "How much money did we make tonight, Lucky?"

I thought it over. "Counting the thousand in advance we got at solemn Sol's, why, we made ten grand."

"Wrong! Counting the thousand we got at Solemn Sol's, why, we made sixty grand."

"Sixty what?" I almost lost control of the car. "What in the continental hell are you talking about?"

Big Lefty laughed long and louder than ever. He said: "I mentioned earlier at the club that these morons wouldn't know what a hundred grand looked like. In the beginning, there was fifty bundles of twenties with a hundred bills to the package. I had Manuel take out twenty-five of the nice little parcels as we followed you to the farm. Then I told Porky there were two hundred twenties in each of the remaining packages, and the greedy slob was dumb enough to believe me."

I was astounded. I said: "But how did you know the amount of bundles and what they contained in the first place?"

Big Lefty lit a cigar, then said: "I asked Jimmy Jackson about the money when we went to get the chopper."

"I'll be damned," I said, amazed, and happily rounding a corner on two wheels. "Where's the dough now?"

The big conniver expelled a great cloud of smoke at me. "Lucky, my

boy," he said, "you might say that tonight you are sitting very pretty. The fifty grand is stuffed under your driver's seat."

That damned Big Lefty. Man, that cat is a storm!



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THE EVIL MEN SPEAK

by **GEORGE F. BELLEFONTAINE**

They work in the dark, those pale shadows. They are weak, but death is in them. They are the stoolies. They buy — and sell — men's lives.

THE RING OF THE telephone shattered the downy tranquility of Charlie Dobson's slumber. He swung his legs over the edge of the cot, lowered them gently to the cold linoleum floor then sat up and held his

aching head. The telephone rang again and he winced.

"All right," he said resignedly.

He glanced across the room at the clock on a shelf above the sink. Blurred hands told him it was almost noon. It was also Wednesday and in an hour's time he was due to meet Barney Ritter for their once a week game of checkers at the park. Charlie was good at checkers. If the telephone hadn't awakened him, he might have missed the opportunity to win enough to buy some wine for his head.

The telephone rang once more. It was situated on the wall near the door.

He went to it, walking lightly, and lifted the receiver to his ear.

"Hello! Hello!" he said gruffly.

"Poppa? It's Ruthie."

"Oh Ruthie." His tone softened for his only child. "Is anything wrong?"

"Yes," Ruthie replied. "It's Chuck. This morning he showed me some literature on various universities. He wanted me to help him choose one so he could register for this coming term."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Poppa, you know how things are with us. Tom's back is getting worse. He's lucky if he can put in a half day at the warehouse now. I'm just barely making ends meet. I tried to explain this to Chuck and he just said there was nothing to worry about." She hesitated for a moment, then, "Poppa, did you tell

Chuck you'd see him through college?"

"Me?"

"He said you did. Last summer when you came out to see him graduate from high school."

It came to him all too suddenly. Last summer, him slightly tipsy, walking down the road with Chuck, talking about—yes, talking about Chuck's future and him telling Chuck that there was nothing to worry about. He would see his only grandson through college.

"Oh, no," Charlie moaned aloud.

"Then you did tell him," Ruthie said, her voice stern now. "You were drunk that day. I should have known. When will you learn, Poppa? Just like it was when Momma was alive. You'd—"

"Please, Ruthie," Charlie pleaded. His head pounded and his mouth tasted sour.

"You'd come home drunk," Ruthie went on, "and make all kinds of promises you'd never be able to keep. When you drink, Poppa, you'll do or say anything. You just don't care about the consequences later. Well I've forgiven and I've forgotten in the past, but now Chuck's going to be hurt and I can't forgive that. But maybe it's better anyway. He'll see you for what you are, a man who can't keep his word."

"Don't, Ruthie. Chuck's always looked up to me. What he thinks of me is important. I mean that, honey."

"You should have thought of that before."

"Ruthie! Listen to me! Somehow I'll keep that promise. I need time. Please don't tell him yet."

"It would cost four or five thousand to send Chuck to college. Where would you get that kind of money, Poppa?"

"I'll get it, Ruthie, I promise."

"Oh, Poppa, you're drunk again."

Charlie heard a click, then a steady hum. He sighed and hung up the receiver.

How could he get his hands on five grand? Wasn't he just getting by on his railway pension? And if he could get his hands on money whenever he wanted it, would he be living here in this moldy one room flat above the butcher shop?

It was crazy to think he could fulfill his promise to Chuck, but he knew he had to try. The world was loaded with money. All he needed was five thousand. It had to be out there somewhere. He was still trying to figure out where an hour later when he sat beside Barney Ritter on the sun warmed park bench.

"Hi, Charlie," Barney said. He was a dumpy little man with brown eyes that shifted here and there as if they were looking for something important. As usual, he was wearing an expensive suit and a silk dress shirt with a conservative tie; all this was in sharp contrast to Charlie's baggy flannels and his worn tweed sport jacket.

How does he do it? Charlie won-

dered. Barney, a bartender before his retirement at age fifty-nine, drove a fancy sports car, dressed to kill and always carried a hefty bankroll. How could he retire at fifty-nine? Perhaps he had invested wisely at an early age. Charlie doubted that. ~~For one thing, Barney was a confirmed bachelor and although he had never taken a drink in his life, he was addicted to gambling and beautiful women. These two vices alone were pretty expensive. So where did the money come from?~~

Barney's apparent affluence had never troubled Charlie in the past, but Charlie had never been this tight for money before.

"You look troubled," Barney said as he opened the checker board and laid on the bench. "Black or red?"

"Black," Charlie replied, adding, "I am troubled."

"Can I help?"

"Sure. Just lend me five grand."

"You look serious."

"I am."

"I'd like to help," Barney said, "but I found out a long time ago that the best way to lose a friend is to loan him money. We've been friends for two years. I'd hate to see that come to an end."

Charlie Dobson found that amusing. He had never really considered Barney a friend. Not that he disliked him. If anything, he found their once-a-week relationship a pleasant way to earn booze money.

"Well I wouldn't want to ruin our friendship," Charlie said, his

serious tone a mask for his true feeling of amusement. "So forget the money. Just tell me your secret."

Barney, who had been setting his checkers on the colored squares looked up now, obviously puzzled by Charlie's remark.

"C'mon now, Barney. How can an ex-barman like you live like a king?"

Charlie shifted his lean body anxiously on the bench. He was watching Barney's eyes closely and from the way they reacted he was certain that Barney would open up.

"It's no secret," Barney smiled. "Many people do what I do, only they, as well as myself, find it safer to talk as little about it as possible."

"You don't trust me enough to lend me money and you don't trust me enough to confide in me. Where in the hell do you get the nerve to call me your friend?"

"Now don't get your back up," Barney said in an apologetic tone. "Let's forget it and get on with our game."

"The hell with checkers," Charlie said, really turning it on now. He rose from the bench, thrust his hands in his pockets and threatened to walk away.

"C'mon, Charlie. Sit down. Please."

"I need money, Barney. You know how to make it. All I want is to know *how*."

"I like you," Barney said. "The kind of business I'm in, I don't have



friends. That's why I like coming here, playing a few games of checkers with you, even though I always lose. Don't ruin it, please."

"Then you'll tell me?"

"Okay," Barney sighed, "I'm a buyer and seller of information."

Charlie sat down and urged Barney to continue.

"People know things. They tell me. I pay them and sell the same info again for a profit."

"To who?" Charlie asked.

"Anyone. Hoods. Cops. Husbands or wives"

~~"There's big money in that?"~~

"Not big money," Barney smiled. "Sometimes, but rarely. Mostly it's little stuff, but a little here and there soon adds up. It began a long time ago. Being a bartender helps. People drink and they like to talk. I soon discovered that people would pay hard cash for some of the conversations I overheard. Now that I'm no longer behind a bar, I got a lot of winos and bums running to me with bits of info. But I still have to be alert and make the rounds. Always have to keep an eye and an ear open. Take that young couple over there."

Barney pointed to a young couple three benches away. They were necking.

"Before you came," Barney continued. "I made a point to stroll past them a few times. I discovered his name was Paul. The girl is his mistress. Paul works for McLellan and Pride Advertising. That's all I could find out for now, but before the night's out I'll know a lot more about friend Paul, including his address and the name of his wife. Chances are she'd be happy to pay a few dollars to know that her husband is being unfaithful."

"Sounds easy," Charlie said.

"Once you learn how to handle yourself. But it can be pretty damn dangerous, too. Like the info I sold the cops a few weeks back. Concerns a certain hood. Maybe you read about it in the papers. His name was Frankie Malone. He rubbed out a competitor, the cops found out and Frankie took it on the lam. Hid out in Arkansas. I made it a point to find out just where in Arkansas. Now Frankie's in jail and he could get the chair."

"Where's the danger in that?" Charlie asked.

"Lucky Malone, Frankie's brother. He heads the syndicate in this town. Runs a string of bowling alleys as his legit cover. If Lucky ever found out who squealed on his brother—"

"I get it," Charlie said. "Don't think I'd like to go through life trying to watch my back."

"You can always stick to the safe stuff. Next Wednesday, if you're still interested, maybe I'll show you how to get started."

"Maybe."

"All right. Come on, let's play checkers."

"I'm broke," Charlie said flatly.

"I trust you," Barney smiled.

"We're friends, aren't we?"

They played checkers until four o'clock. Barney had to leave then. Charlie took his winnings, purchased two bottles of wine and returned to his room."

He spent the evening drinking

ine, smoking cheap cigars and inking about the promise he had ade Chuck. He also thought about irney and the way Barney made a ring. It was too slow.

Charlie needed money in a hurry. ut there was something else about arney that continued to nag at harlie's thoughts. He didn't like it first, in fact it sickened him, but ter on it didn't seem so bad be- use by then he was feeling quite gh.

It was close to midnight when harlie swallowed the last drop of ine. He had been lving on the cot id now he struggled to get on his et. He managed that feat and on isteady legs made his way across e room to the telephone. The dictory was on a table beneath the lephone. He opened it, fumbled

through the pages until he found what he was looking for, then lifted the telephone receiver and dialed a number.

"Malone's Bowling Alley, Incorporated," a man answered gruffly.

"My name's Charlie Dobson. I would like to speak to Lucky Ma lone."

"Yeah. What for?"

The room began to spin. Charlie steadied himself by leaning his fore- head against the wall. He saw Chuck's trusting face somewhere off in a fog. *It's all right, Chuck. You're going to college.*

"Tell Lucky Malone I have some information to sell," Charlie said finally. "For five grand I can tell him who squealed to the cops on his brother, Frankie."



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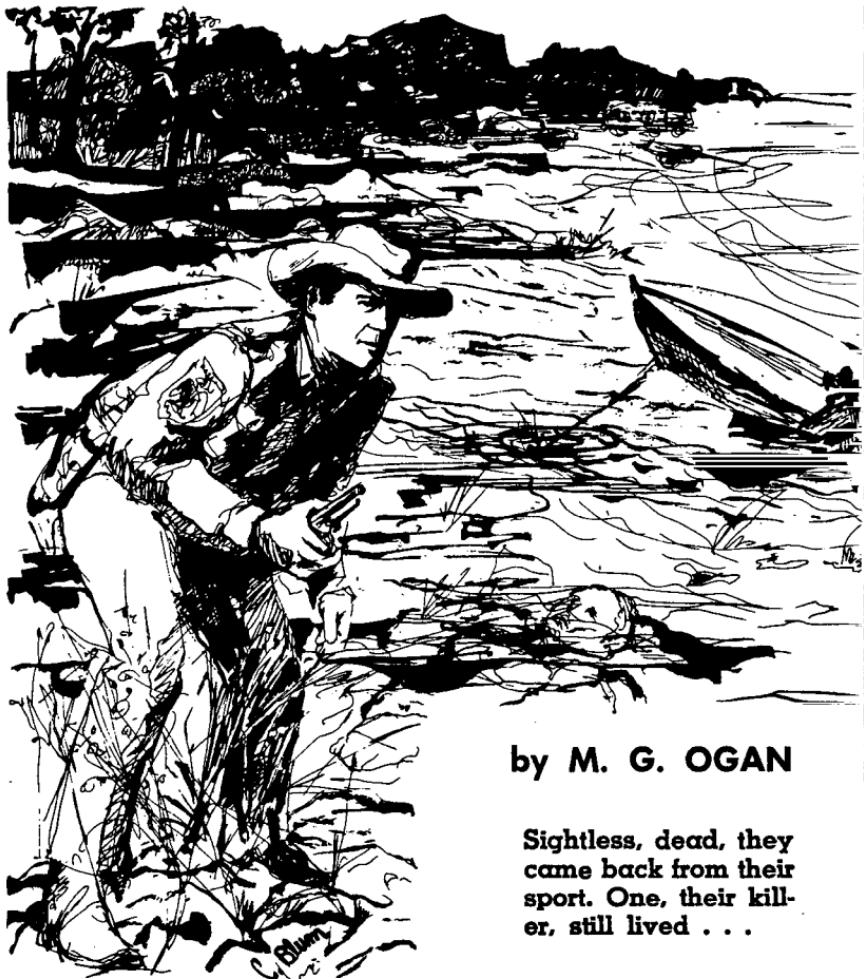
THE RISE AND FALL OF AL CAPONE

Another Sensational New TRUE Crime Gangland Thriller

by DAVID MAZROFF

While he lived, other men lived in abject fear. While he ruled, a thousand men died violent deaths in the streets of Chicago. Here, for the first time, is the incredible true story of the scar-faced hood who bathed the city of Chicago in blood for ten incredible years. While Al Capone lived, no man's life was safe. Here is his true story—the story which made all America afraid . . .

Fourth Man



by M. G. OGAN

Sightless, dead, they
came back from their
sport. One, their kill-
er, still lived . . .

APRIL 15th is the first day of bass season in Jefferson County, which makes it easy for me to remember my wedding anniversary, so Friday afternoon I went into

Tate's Quality Drugs for Chan Number 5. Bass season opened the next day.

George Strebeck was at the men toiletries counter.

"Are you going to wet a line tomorrow?" I asked George.

"No, damn it. Business in Daly City is going to keep me down there until Monday. Tomorrow will be my first miss of the opening day in five years."

George is a real estate broker and investment counselor, when he isn't off fishing somewhere.

George sometimes lacks judgment, or he's crooked—take your pick. Anyway, the Parker Jones Mutual Fund hadn't made him the most popular man in Jeffersonville when the founder of the fund left for parts unknown with a sizeable chunk of Jefferson County cash.

"Are you taking Louisa with you?" I asked. "If you're not, I'll have the boys keep an eye on your place, in the event some joker plans to express disapproval with a fire bomb."

I wasn't joking. Some very ugly talk was going around.

George scowled. "I suppose you're the last person in this county who doesn't know Louisa left my bed and board last Monday. Don't you read the legal notices?"

"I missed that one. I'm sorry to hear it."

"Save your tears. We haven't been making it for a long time. If Hank Rosson doesn't steal everything I own for Louisa, I suppose I'll be better off."

"Aren't you and Hank friends?"

"We've fished together. It's supposed to be a friendly thing. I've

retained Allan Perot, another fishing buddy."

George Strebeck is a big, black-haired man, one of my high school classmates. We've never been close, yet I felt sorry for him that afternoon. I suppose it's natural for the happily married man to judge the extent of another's loss by the way he'd feel in a similar circumstance.

Jefferson County contributed its share to the national crime rate that weekend. A country store was held up on Beggs road and I had to organize road blocks to catch the fool who'd bought a \$15 pistol to net \$14.96 cash.

We had a stabbing, a cutting, two assaults with intent, one forcible rape, and some comic relief Sunday afternoon. Two old codgers had a neighborly shoot-out near Meeker Crossroads over ownership of a woods hog, and missed each other, but killed the hog.

We had the usual drunk and disorderlies, a fair quota of driving while intoxicated, one automobile faltal—when a truck and a DWI disputed right-of-way over a narrow bridge—and the usual family squabbles.

By Monday morning I'd forgotten George Strebeck, my wedding anniversary present, and the opening day of bass season. I hadn't been home since lunch Friday noon. My only sleep had been catnaps on the couch in my office. Like just about every other sheriff's depart-

ment, mine is chronically short-handed.

Lora had just phoned.

"Nice to know you haven't deserted me and our two hell-raisers, Scott," she'd said, "but what do we do for Daddy when you've killed yourself overworking?"

Dix Jennings had the board and radio. He's a cranky sixty-four, marking time until sixty-five and retirement.

"You don't treat that woman right," he told me. "She's young and pretty. You'd better go home before someone else puts their shoes under her bed, Wade."

"Thank you, Dix, but who makes out all of these reports, in duplicate and triplicate?"

A light on the otherwise quiet board winked, and Dix plugged in. In a moment, he covered the phone's mouthpiece.

"Mrs. Wooten calling for you," he said. "Do you want it in your office?"

"No, I'll take it here." I scooped the phone off the counter.

Earl Wooten owns the Jefferson National Bank, and backed my opponent last November, so I knew this wasn't a social call. She told me that Earl had taken Hank Rossen and Allen Perot up to Horseshoe Lake with him Friday evening, to go bass fishing. They had been due back Sunday night.

Although Earl's camper-truck had a radio telephone, he hadn't called

Mrs. Wooten, and she hadn't been able to reach him.

"Earl isn't usually so inconsiderate," she said, "especially since I've been ill. I'm terribly worried, Sheriff Wade."

"I'm sure everything is all right," I told her, "but I'll route a car to Horseshoe right away."

Dix Jennings cocked a bushy eyebrow in my direction when I was off the phone.

"Who are you sending?" he asked. "Sturdivant is cleaning up the hold-up investigation, Forbes has traffic duty, and Bellows is serving warrants."

"I guess that leaves me."

Dix Jennings nodded.

"That deal don't sound good to me," he said, scowling. "That's a lonely spot out there."

Earl Wooten had bought Horseshoe Lake and all of the wooded property surrounding it three years ago. He'd fenced and posted it. Horseshoe used to be a bend in the Black River, but was cut off a hundred years ago when a channel silted up. Earl built a dam and a spillway at the head of the lake's north arm to raise its surface. It's one of the last primitive areas in our county.

It's thirty-one miles on State 19 to the access road into Horseshoe. I drove the distance through a perfect spring morning—trees budding, fruit orchards blooming, and flocks of blackbirds flying north.

It's a half mile of dirt road from

State 19 in to the lake. Earl's west fence line is along the highway. I noticed the tire marks when I got out to open the gate.

Light weekend showers had pocked the truck and boat trailer tire marks driving in, but not coming out since Friday evening. Fresher car tire marks overlaid these, made going in and coming out since the showers stopped last night. That meant the car driver had gone in after eight o'clock. I'd smudged any fingerprints on the gate latch by the time I spotted the car tracks.

I moved my cruiser to block the access road and hiked to the cleared half acre on the west shore of the lake, where Earl parks his truck and launches his boat. I'd come upon an ominously quiet scene.

The truck and camper were locked up. The boat trailer was down by the lake, but the boat was gone. Beside the trailer were stacked three orange life jackets. There was no sound of an outboard motor to shatter the late morning stillness.

The car had parked about twenty yards from the truck, in full sight, so the visitor was known or had been expected. The loamy clay ground plainly showed shoe prints to the camper, but not back to the car, which puzzled me momentarily, because tire marks showed the car had turned around to drive off.

I was more puzzled when I discovered the print of bare feet, coming up to where the car had been parked from the lake shore.

I skirted the scene, careful not to smudge any track, to scan the north arm of Horseshoe for the boat. It was keel-up in the water, down close to the dam, with no sign of life.

The trail to the dam showed those same bare foot prints. Whoever made them had walked back from the dam, but hadn't used the trail to reach it.

The capsized boat was drifting about twenty yards from the dam, the anchor chain disappearing into the depths of murky water. Gasoline and oil from the outboard had spread an oil slick around the craft.

A foot depth of spring freshet was racing through the spillway into Dusky Bayou below the dam. Earl Wooten had been washed through the spillway and was tangled in cypress knees down there.

When I'd pulled him up on the bank of the bayou stream, pressure on his chest brought only light froth from his nostrils and mouth, so I knew his lungs weren't water-logged. Rosy cheeks, red lips, and a drop of cherry-red blood squeezed from the ring cut under his chin shouted the real cause of death—carbon monoxide.

His left hand was clenched. *Cadaveric spasm* isn't fully understood, because neither primary muscular flaccidity following death, nor *rigor mortis*, affects a set of muscles tensed during the death spasm. *Strong as a dead man's grip*—it isn't an idle phrase. It took all my

strength to unclench that hand, and take the coat button from it.

I left Earl on the bank. By the time I'd reached the clearing, and studied the scene with new knowledge, I was certain the other two men were in the lake.

~~The fourth man had made three bare-footed trips from the camper to the water's edge where I found the keel mark of the launched boat. Each trip from the camper, he'd carried a heavy burden.~~

Particles of the rubber hose had clung to the hot tailpipe. Traces of masking tape were on the glass of the back window, which was up an inch. The truck's gas tank was close to the empty mark.

I was dealing with triple murder by carbon monoxide.

A drenching rain that never materialized had been forecast for Sunday night. That was a bad break for the killer. With tire marks and foot prints washed away, and Earl not found until traces of the noxious gas in his system were masked by bloating, the fourth man's deed could very well have been racked up as another "accidental drowning".

It's my personal opinion that more than a third of all "accidental" deaths are actually murder.

I radioed from the cruiser for Dwight Sturdivant to come out and take over at the murder scene, bringing a Game and Fish Department river patrol boat, with Scuba divers and grapnels. I also radioed the State Police barracks in Jefferson



County for Wayne "Snoopy" Horn and his crew of criminology specialists.

Snoopy skidded his black panel truck field lab to a gravel-spattering stop at the gate before Dwight arrived. He handles that truck as if it is one of the stock car racers that shortened his left leg, and caused him to seek a safer profession.

Snoopy is lank, laconic and round-shouldered, with cow-licked black hair and the somber eyes of a bloodhound. The long nose between those eyes earned him his nickname.

"What do we have going out here?" he asked.

"I'd say triple murder."

Snoopy whistled softly.

I named the victims.

"It must be open season on leading citizens," he said. "We'll see what we can find out."

"Start with tire tracks," I told

im. "I want to know everything you can tell me about the fourth man's car."

I broke the news of death to Mrs. Wooten and Mrs. Perot without mentioning murder. Hank Rossen's nearest kin" was his legal secretary, and his mistress, Alma Cottenham, a tall, middle-aged woman, competent in both departments, it was my understanding.

I spoke about murder to her. That's how I learned the State Banking Committee was preparing to indict not only George Strebeck, but also Earl Wooten, Hank Rossen, and Allan Perot for complicity in the Parker Jones swindle. There were out-of-state Mafia or Syndicate links to the affair, Alma claimed.

"A paid assassin killed them," Alma insisted tearfully. "Henry was afraid of this. They went up to the lake for a conference about how to protect themselves."

I went home from Rossen's office.

For the obvious reason that they're fulfilling a contract, paid killers seldom try to disguise their crimes. There's always the exception that proves the rule, however.

I had a strong hunch who the fourth man was.

After a nap, a shave, and a shower, Lora told me that George Strebeck was calling while I was putting on a fresh uniform.

"Take a message, please," I called to her.

George wanted to see me right away at his office.

I stopped first at the mortuary to see if our M.E., Paul Strickland, had anything for me. All three bodies were there now.

"Chloral hydrate, or knockout drops, administered in whisky, put them out," Paul told me. "Carbon monoxide did the rest. All three went into the water dead."

"You're sure they got the chloral in whisky?"

"Absolutely. Bourbon."

"How about blood alcohol content?"

"Very low. I'd say one drink, perhaps two, if they were weak."

My second stop was at the sheriff's office in the courthouse, where Snoopy was waiting for me.

The button had been torn off a new, brown sports coat, one that hadn't yet been to the cleaners. The fourth man wore a 10½ D-width shoe, was about six feet in height, and weighed between 190 and 200 pounds.

"Drinks were served in the camper," Snoopy told me, "but there was no whisky bottle. No fingerprints either, in the camper—it was wiped clean—but we got a fine thumb and fingerprint from the rearview mirror. Your fourth man must have absent-mindedly adjusted it while he was running the engine to asphyxiate his chums. We've sent his prints to the F.B.I."

"How about his car?"

"Three of the tires were original

equipment on 1968 Chevs, four-door. The right rear was a new tire. You get a break there, Scott, because it was off-brand rubber. A Windsor four-ply sold only in Daly City, and here in Jeffersonville. There's something else. A hair was tangled with the thread of the button. Gray hair, dyed black."

"What about those bare foot prints?"

"No problem. Your fourth man stripped, down to his shorts, probably, so he could swim ashore after he'd dumped the boat. Dressed and undressed in his car. Here's something else to think about. Water out there is 56 degrees. He'd have to be a strong swimmer, used to cold water, to swim in the stuff at that temp. Do you know any skin divers?"

"I know a frogman left over from World War II."

Snoopy laid a glossy black and white enlargement on my desk. "That's the ring cut on Wooten's chin. We reversed the negative before enlarging it, to avoid a mirror image. It's a school ring of some kind, and you can even make out the date."

"Sure enough. Well, I think that just about does it, Snoopy. Thanks."

"I'm going to have to have police protection," was the first thing George Strebeck told me when I

finally reached his office. "Al told you about the out-of-state deal I was a fool to get sucked in!"

"George, you'll get plenty of police protection from now on," said. "You're a fool, all right, the way it turns out."

He'd paled. "What do you mean?"

"Tire tracks, foot prints, a hair and the original middle button of that sports coat you're wearing pin you on the scene last night. thumb and finger print, when hear from the F.B.I., will be corroborative evidence. Earl wasn't quite out when you were ready to carry him down to the boat, so you had to tap him on the chin

I pointed to his high school graduation class ring. "And then there's the fact you were buying black hair dye Friday afternoon."

Corner a fool and he'll run bluff. "What possible motive would I have?"

"George, friend, I don't need motive to convict you of murder with the evidence we'll have by the time you go to trial on three counts of Murder One. But let's try a upcoming investigation where fourth man would find three dead colleagues very convenient when it comes to placing blame. Do you like that for a motive? I think a jury might."

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